



# MRS CRICHTON'S CREDITOR

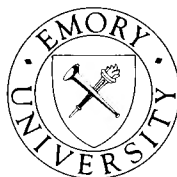
BY MRS ALEXANDER



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MRS. CRICHTON'S CREDITOR.



# MRS. CRICHTON'S CREDITOR

A Novel

*By*

MRS. ALEXANDER,

*Author of*

*"A Golden Autumn," "A Fight with Fate,"*

*"Found Wanting," "For His Sake" &c*

A NEW EDITION

LONDON

F. V WHITE & CO

14 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C

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1899

PRINTED BY  
KELLY'S DIRECTORIES, LIMITED, 182, 183 AND 184, HIGH HOLBORN, W.C.,  
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.



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MRS. CRICHTON'S CREDITOR.



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### CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG man of twenty-five or thirty, descending the steps of the Junior United Service Club one bright, blowy, dusty March afternoon, turned right into Regent Street, and walked towards Piccadilly. He was slightly above middle height, and strongly built, well dressed, but not fashionable-looking. There was a roll in his walk that did not seem like the gait of a man habituated to streets, and his aspect, his tanned face, his good-humoured but resolute grey eyes, showed none of the immobility of an experienced man of the world ; rather they seemed pleased with everything they looked upon. This was natural enough, for Lieutenant Norman Adair, R.N., had lately inherited a handsome and unexpected fortune, and so, after a boyhood and youth of very straitened circumstances, suddenly found himself possessed of ample means, while life was still fresh.



He walked along leisurely, pausing every now and then to look up and down the street.

"Not an empty hansom in sight," he said, half aloud. "Town is wonderfully full. Halloo, there's an old Kilburn Red, by Jove! I'll try the knife-board once more, for old acquaintance' sake. A very familiar acquaintance it used to be."

He hailed the omnibus and clambered actively to a seat on the driver's left, lit a cigar and was soon in high chat with the shrewd old Jehu.

It was more than four years since Adair had been in London, and there were many changes and improvements to discuss. Gradually, however, the conversation slackened, as visions of many a by-gone journey along the same route came crowding up from memory's stores.

Thank God, he thought, he had been able to send his mother and sister to spend the winter in Italy, away from the monotonous mediocrity of a small abode in the neighbourhood of Maida Vale, the goal of his present excursion, undertaken to fulfil a promise to his mother that he would call on a former next-door neighbour of hers to whom they were indebted for much kindly attention.

"Do you still change horses hereabouts?" he

asked, observing the driver tighten his reins and press his foot on the brake as they neared Church Street

“Yes, sir. They do talk of changing at the Cock, but, for my part, I don’t see as how the ’osses is to do it.”

Here they came to a stand-still, and Adair recognized the archway into a stable yard, whence an hostler was leading a pair of rough but not ill-conditioned horses. He had stopped there often before, and knew the physiognomy of the place. An exceeding odoriferous fish-shop was at the farther side of the arch, and on the side next him a well-stocked pawnbroker’s shop, the large window crowded with parcels of knives and forks, open cases showing silver cups, spoons, ornamental implements for needlework, jewellery, birthday and christening-gifts, clocks, umbrellas, mathematical instruments—nothing too precious, nothing too insignificant, to escape the voracious maw of inexorable necessity.

“What tragedies the contents of that window could reveal!” thought Adair, gazing down upon it, for his feet were nearly on a level with the higher panes. As he gazed he found he could see into the interior of the shop, between a dish-cover and an Indian china vase. His attention was

caught by two figures within : one, a greasy dark young man with a very large nose, was bending over the counter, inspecting the contents of a jewel-case ; the other, a lady—yes, certainly a lady—with well-defined but delicate eyebrows, glossy fair hair, and a sweet curved mouth, which, as Adair watched intently, smiled pleasantly on the dark young man and said something, of course inaudible to her unseen witness. She wore a black lace bonnet with something blue in it, and some dark covering on her shoulders. Her eyes were hidden from him, looking down as he did, but there was something in the shape of her face and the pose of her head which seemed oddly familiar to him and strangely fascinating.

While Adair looked, the dark young man closed the jewel-case and went away. The lady sat down by the counter, put her elbow upon it, and rested her head on her hand, displaying a white throat, the graceful bend of which Adair fancied expressed despondency.

At this point in the drama the omnibus gave a sudden jerk, and he was swept away from the contemplation of the curious little scene, which roused his profound interest.

Twenty theories sprang up in his imagination, between the pawnbroker's and Winchester Avenue, his destination, as to what could possibly bring so high-bred-looking a gentlewoman into such an unsuitable locality.

"But, after all," he mused, "the chances and changes of impecuniosity make all alike liable to seek favours from the universal relative. She may have a spendthrift husband or brother, or an 'habitual inebriate' for a father. At all events, it is an infamous shame that a refined, delicate creature like that should be obliged to come in contact with low fellows and be forced into so trying a position. Poverty and difficulty are deucedly hard on women, well-bred women especially."

This sage reflection brought him to the corner of Winchester Avenue.

Norman Adair was on the surface a good-natured, good-humoured fellow, and not inclined to waste energy or opposition on trifles; he was therefore easily detained by his mother's rather garrulous friend, and induced, by much pressing, to swallow a large cup of very sweet, hot, weak tea; but at last he escaped, leaving a most agreeable impression on the mind of the tea-maker.

He was glad to walk briskly away towards town and let his imagination dwell upon the face he had seen framed in between the dish-cover and the china vase, which had fixed itself so firmly in his mind. It was fair and fresh, and yet it was not girlish. There was a certain strength in it. He wished he could see it again; but that was not likely.

Adair was a great admirer of beauty, in a hearty, honest way; indeed, his heart was quite accustomed to be lost and found again, in many climates and latitudes; but no charmer, charm she never so potently, ever long diverted his thoughts from his profession. Even now he intended going to sea again as soon as he could get a berth.

Here he turned at the rattle of a cab, and saw an approaching hansom; but it had a passenger, and he lowered the cane he had raised to hail it.

The next moment a voice he knew called to the driver to stop, and then cried, "Halloo, Adair! Going my way? Come along."

Adair recognized a young dragoon officer whose acquaintance he had made abroad and renewed since his return to town, where they had become rather chums.



"I'm going to look at a horse somewhere near Regent's Park. Come along, if you have nothing better to do ; though I don't suppose horses have been much in your line."

"No, not of late years ; but as a boy I was desperately fond of riding. We lived in a hunting country, and I often got a mount, for I by no means disdained the friendship of huntsmen and grooms."

"Lucky fellow, to have the means of setting up a stable of your own."

"It will not be much good to me when I am afloat."

They bowled away, talking with animation about the various subjects dear to the hearts of young men ; and time flew fast in the congenial occupation of examining the horses exhibited by the dealer they went to see.

It was late when Adair reached his hotel, and he found he had barely time to dress and drive to Harley Square, South Kensington, where he was to dine. He was a good deal struck by the number of invitations he had received since his return to London. Every one he had ever known seemed to be delighted to see him and to lavish hospitality upon him. He was quite aware that it was by no

means a personal tribute, but he accepted everything as it came, without any cynical reflections, but valuing these attentions at their proper worth.

As he expected, Adair was the last to arrive, and while the host shook hands with him he uttered a short emphatic "Dinner" to the servant. "Afraid I am a little late, Mrs. Grey," said Adair apologetically to the hostess, a plump, richly dressed woman, with many jewels disposed about her person.

"Oh, you are just in time," she answered, benignly. "Here, Marian," to a very slim, elegant girl in white, "let me introduce Mr. Adair to you. He was on board the *Firefly* with your brother Frank. Will you take my daughter down to dinner?" At the same moment the solemn tones of the butler sounded above the buzz of conversation, "Dinner is on the table," and the guests began to move off. It was a large gathering, and Adair had advanced but a very few paces from the door when the elders of the party began to file past him, and he was at once addressed by his new acquaintance with some tender inquiries respecting Frank, so he did not notice any one till they were all seated at table.

Mr. Grey was commercially connected with Calcutta, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and they were now succeeding in a fairly good class of London society with the facility which awaits those whose purses are well lined and who are liberal in distributing the lining.

"Where is your brother now?" asked Adair, as he unfolded his napkin.

"He is on board the *Calliope*."

"Ah! she's on the Mediterranean station. He is lucky. It's a delightful——" He paused abruptly, forgetting what he was going to say and to whom he was going to say it, in the extreme surprise which seized him as his eyes encountered those of his opposite neighbour. She sat on the host's left, a somewhat ferocious-looking dowager occupying the place of honour. She was distinguished in style; her small, well-set-on head was decorated only by its own blond shining tresses, which were sufficiently wavy and profuse to form an abundant coiffure. Extremely fair with a rich creamy fairness, her eyes were deeply grey, with long lashes and straight eyebrows, both darker than might have been expected from her hair and complexion. The curves of her mouth

were sweet but firm. She wore a dress of fine black lace over silk, also black, made in demi-toilette fashion, then much rarer than at present, her snowy neck showing through the filmy covering. Her only ornament was a brilliant star of diamonds which clasped a black velvet ribbon round her throat, and two or three Marshal Niel roses with their glossy dark green leaves, fastened where the lace of her bodice crossed low on her bosom.

Adair had often seen more faultlessly beautiful women, but never one whose expression, so animated, so winning, charmed him as hers did.

While he gazed, she addressed her host with a smile which turned Adair's surprise and hesitation into astonished certainty. Yes, this charming, queenly woman was the same he had beheld that afternoon in a petty pawnbroker's shop in Edgware Road, and the pity he had lavished on her was probably thrown away. What business had a woman of her means and position to be in such a place? It was probably some reckless, disgraceful extravagance which drove her there. But, after all, who could tell? Somehow, her face and the turn of her neck as she inclined her head to her

host were quite familiar to him. Where had he seen her before?

By this time the soup was over and the salmon was going round. Adair felt that he had neglected his fair neighbour, so started afresh :

“ And how does Frank—your brother—like the Mediterranean ? ”

“ Oh, very much indeed. I want papa to take us to Malta next winter. Frank says there is a great deal going on there in the winter.”

“ Yes, there is—lots. Pray, who is the lady in black opposite? I fancy I know her.”

“ In black lace? Oh, Mrs. Crichton. She is considered very handsome and agreeable.”

“ Ah, indeed. I don't think I know anyone of that name. Who was she before her marriage?”

“ I haven't an idea. I think mother knows.”

Baffled for a moment, Adair resumed his study of the lady opposite him, while the talk grew more fluent and general.

“ I must say, if D—— or L—— could look out of their graves, they'd be glad to go back to them,” cried a thin, bony, well-set-up old man with a saffron complexion and large grey moustache. “ The way the natives are allowed to talk, and



swagger, and publish their native press, and abuse their betters, is enough to raise the shade of Clive. We are cutting a stick to beat our own backs."

"The extraordinary development of æsthetic taste," said a lady with a wild growth of dark hair, through which a gold bandeau gleamed, while a garment like a white satin night-gown hung from her shoulders, "is the great feature of the age, and is no doubt the precursor of a burst of heroic poetry."

"I assure you I have it from the best authority that the prince has taken five to three against Gloriana for the Derby."

"Hock or champagne?" whispered the butler, in confidential tones.

Through the babble Adair caught the voice of his opposite neighbour, soft, rich, somewhat deep tones, though he could not exactly distinguish her words. A large épergne stood between him and the object of his observation, but he was fortunate in finding a loop-hole between the branches and blossoms that decorated it, through which he could see without being seen. Mrs. Crichton was evidently much interested and amused by the conversation of her left-hand neighbour, and Adair

thought he had never before watched so bright and speaking a face.

Miss Grey did not find him a very satisfactory companion. He was so preoccupied that she was obliged to take refuge with the gentleman on her other side and leave Adair to his own thoughts.

Shortly before the ladies left the room there was a momentary lull, and Adair distinctly heard Mrs. Crichton say, "No, I do not agree with you. I think it is mere special pleading;" and then he recognized the voice, and knew why the face seemed familiar to him. The mist rolled away from his memory, he had a swift vision of a little ivy-covered parsonage with an old Norman village church close by, of a meadow and bit of pasture where the parson's cow grazed peacefully, of autumn-tinted woods beyond, through which a trout-stream from the distant blue hills ran babbling and chafing against big grey stones; of his own early home, a rambling old-fashioned house at the entrance of the village; and of happy, heedless, boyish days. Ah, he knew all about his charming, puzzling neighbour now, he would introduce himself in the drawing-room! How changed his former playfellow was! She had developed into a woman

of the world, mistress of herself, ready of speech, guarded, but gracious.

How interminably the men sat on! What bosh they talked about politics, and stocks, and the probabilities of war in the East! The only object of interest to the impatient sailor was a gentleman who had moved up nearer his host when the ladies left the room, and who was addressed as Mr. Crichton. He was short, or his breadth made him seem short, yet he was not fleshy; his size consisted of bone and muscle. He was very dark—a handsome man, with regular features and nearly black eyes. Adair didn't like them; they were impatient, almost fierce, eyes, yet shifty, and never quite steady under another's gaze. His accent sounded rather Scotch to Adair, but he spoke little, and that little chiefly about India, while he smoked diligently.

At last the old Indian colonel made a move, and Adair gladly followed him upstairs.

Miss Grey and a young sister were performing a somewhat noisy duet on a fine new Erard piano, to which Mrs. Crichton sat listening in the comfortable corner of a sofa at some distance. Adair paused a moment, and then went straight to her.

"May I venture to introduce myself to you?" he

asked, with a frank smile and an admiring glance in his steady eyes.

Mrs. Crichton looked up, a little startled, and bent her head, saying, with a certain gracious gravity, "Certainly."

"Then let me remind you that in days gone by Gwendoline Hill and Norman Adair were very good friends, in spite of many quarrels and great differences of opinion."

"Norman Adair!" she exclaimed, in great surprise, straightening herself up from her semi-recumbent attitude. "Do you mean to say you are Norman Adair? You are greatly changed; that large moustache, and your height! You have grown so tall! Ah, yes, it *is* Norman." She stretched out her hand to him with a smile. "I am very, very glad to meet you." And she gathered her gown closer to make room for him beside her.

Adair, his heart beating with a degree of triumph and pleasure at which he was himself amused, gladly accepted the tacit invitation. "You puzzled me all through dinner," he said. "It was only when I heard your voice distinctly that I remembered. You are changed, too—very much changed. You seem older, and——"

"I have always heard that sailors are the bravest of the brave," she interrupted, laughing; "but your daring is something quite extraordinary, to tell a woman to her face that she looks older."

"Yes; isn't it uncouth? But it is true; and I don't know that anyone would willingly exchange your present for your past."

"Except myself, perhaps," she said, with a quick sigh. "How long is it since we met, Norman?"

"Close on twelve years. After my mother left Altringham and settled in London, I quite lost sight of you. One is afraid to inquire for any one. I did hear you had lost your father; what a capital fellow he was! But Mary, your sister, who was so delicate——"

"She still lives and suffers," said Mrs. Crichton, looking down, while a slight quiver passed over her lips. "Where are your mother and sister?"

"I insisted on their going to St. Remo for the winter. My mother always has a terrible cough, and Effie is not strong." He went on to tell her of his good fortune, at once adopting a friendly familiarity of tone that she readily reciprocated.

She questioned him as to his career and prospects. "I am glad you are rich, Norman," she said,

after a short pause. "I have lived for the last eight or nine years in an atmosphere of wealth. Not that Mr. Crichton is rich—at least, rich enough to please himself—but we live among rich people, and at any rate I have learned to think filthy lucre the most important, the most essential thing in the world."

"Then you *must* be changed," he cried. "You used to be the most exalted heroine possible. Don't you remember how we used to quarrel, and how heartily you despised me as a low-minded, practical individual? You were quite cruel."

"My cruelty made but small impression on you," she said, laughing. "You were a most unsentimental pickle of a boy. But you must come and see me, Norman. I have three sweet babies—at least, very sweet to me; the eldest is seven. When will you come?"

"To-morrow," Adair returned, promptly. "At what time?"

"I am always at home at tea-time—five o'clock. Write down my address."

"Trust me, I shall not forget," said Adair, emphatically.

"Don't trust your memory. Nineteen, Sutherland Gardens—at the other side, the unfashionable

side, of the Park. George," she said, as her husband approached, "I have found an old friend. Let me introduce Mr. Norman Adair to you ; perhaps I ought to say Lieutenant Adair."

Mr. Crichton bowed and shook hands cordially ; then he drew a chair near his wife and joined in the conversation. Adair watched him closely. His manner was plain and rather heavy, but in no way common or ill-bred. He was not very fluent, and Adair noticed that his wife frequently gave him a lift over small difficulties with wonderfully delicate tact.

At last Mr. Crichton looked at his watch and remarked that it wanted only a quarter to eleven ; whereupon she immediately rose and wished her old acquaintance good-night, adding, "Pray come and see me."

"You must settle with Mr. Adair what day he will dine with us, and get one or two of our Indian friends to meet him. I think you have been a good deal abroad," said Crichton, hospitably, and, again shaking hands with him, followed Mrs. Crichton to make their adieux to the hostess.

Adair left soon after. It was a fine clear night, so he lit a cigar and strolled homeward in deep

thought. Yes, it was true that in the old times he was often at war with Gwen Hill. She thought no end of herself; and her tongue was both sharp and quick—far quicker than his; but she was a brick in spite of it all. And now what a charming woman she had become! That Crichton was a lucky fellow. Why, if she were free, Adair thought he would have been inclined to have a try for her himself; but she was married, and there was an end of it. How he wished he had never pried into that infernal pawnbroker's! What extraordinary chance could have taken her there? Did Crichton know it? No, he felt pretty sure Crichton did not; though they seemed very good friends. Stay; he had always heard women would go into queer places in search of bargains. Something had caught her eye in the window; some bauble, dirt-cheap. What a blockhead he was not to have thought of this before!

This idea gave him great comfort. Adair's idea of what a good woman ought to be was very exalted, and that a creature who had so suddenly captivated his imagination should have any dealings, save picking up a bargain (and even that she had better have left alone), with such people



and in such a place, was infinitely revolting to him. She was evidently the wife of a rich man ; she could have no legitimate need for transactions with a pawnbroker ?

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## CHAPTER II.

TIME seemed to drag frightfully next day.

Adair had to see his solicitor and stockbroker ; for property, as well as poverty, has its cares. These engagements helped the moments to pass till five o'clock. The last strokes of the hour were sounding from a neighbouring church when he rang the bell at Mr. Crichton's door.

"Sutherland Gardens," in the front, was nothing more nor less than a street, but behind the house lay a large piece of ground, well planted and laid out, on which the best rooms opened. It was a large, comfortable abode, but not exactly a mansion. Adair was admitted by a typically neat parlour-maid, who ushered him upstairs past a pretty conservatory to a solemn drawing-room oppressively furnished with buhl cabinets, velvet-like carpets, richly-covered chairs and sofas, heavy portières and curtains, elaborate china, bronze, and

ivory ornaments, among which Indian productions prevailed. The blinds were down, and the general aspect of the apartment was funereal. With a request that he would sit down, the servant left him to his own reflections. Before he had time to do more than glance round, Mrs. Crichton entered. She was very simply dressed in a gown of dark blue cashmere and velvet, but nothing could make her figure look other than graceful and stately.

"Very glad to see you!" she exclaimed, giving him her hand. "You ought not to have been put in this dreary room. I should commit suicide if I sat alone here. Come down to my little sanctum."

"By all means," Adair returned, and he followed her downstairs to a pleasant parlour with a bay-window which opened on the garden. It was larger than back rooms generally are in London, and abundantly furnished—a large useful table, dwarf bookcases, a comfortable sofa, a small cottage piano, a big work-basket well filled, some glasses, and a bowl full of flowers, plenty of sunshine—evidently the abode of an active, industrious woman.

"There, that is a comfortable corner. Mr. Crichton likes that chair whenever he comes in here," she said. "Do you know, it is very good of you to

come all the way from the gauds and gaities of fashionable life to this bourgeois quarter ? ”

“ Very good to myself,” he returned, taking the place assigned him, and looking attentively at her, to trace what was the change which left her so unlike, while still so like, what she had formerly been. “ You know I am a stranger in London : I never stayed here long ; it was too expensive a pleasure to indulge in, formerly. Now I intend to enjoy it, at any rate for a while.”

“ And then go to sea again ? ”

“ Yes ; that is the life I like best.”

Here tea was brought in, with a dainty dish of buttered toast, crisp and hot.

“ I hope you don't disdain tea ? ” asked Mrs. Crichton.

“ It is my favourite beverage.”

“ And tell me more about yourself,” she continued, handing him a cup.

“ I don't think I have anything to add to what I told you last night. I have got on fairly well, considering I had no interest. I came home every three years or so, to have a peep at my mother and sister, and then about a year ago my father's cousin, a bit of a miser, died rather suddenly, and left me

all he possessed, which is a good lot more than any one expected. I was away on the South American station when that happened, and I only got home in December: so it's something very new, and, I must say, delightful, to find myself permanently flush of cash."

"Well, it is quite possible that by and by you may grow accustomed to it and think you haven't enough. Oh, Norman, try never to grow greedy about money; it is a terrible hunger! I am so glad you haven't it; yet the want of money is cruel, degrading, miserable."

"I am glad to see, Mrs. Crichton," said Adair looking round, "that you are not afflicted in that way."

"Oh, no, of course my husband is well off; but that is not like, not quite like, having money of one's own."

"Isn't it?" said Adair, opening his honest eyes. "I fancy I should be very much riled if my wife didn't consider my belongings as hers too."

"Would you?" cried Mrs. Crichton. She laughed as if much amused, yet there was a curious ring of sadness about the sound as it ceased. "I suppose some men are like that. But if your wife brought

you in long milliner's bills, you would not like it? You would prefer her keeping within the limits of her allowance."

"I fancy the woman *I* am going to fall in love with would be too well principled to run heavy bills."

Mrs. Crichton slowly shook her head. "It is hard to tell in advance who or what will take your fancy."

"Why should I not marry a woman like you? I am sure you could be trusted with anything and——"

"Hush!" she interrupted, with a quick flush, and then with an air of solemn mockery added, "Ah, you see, the difficulty would be to find anything like me anywhere."

"I am quite ready to believe that," Adair replied, with laughing eyes, as he doubled up a thin slice of bread and butter. "I remember what a first-rate girl you were at the parsonage long ago—how you used to do everything for every one—ay, and took command of every one in the bargain."

"Ah, Norman, that girl has disappeared: she has been swept away down the rapids of Time's stream. This is a woman who has learned the limits of her own power and capabilities. I have been at school

since we met. You know I married a man older and richer than myself. He was very generous and disinterested ; he took me for myself alone ; and it was my duty and pleasure to mould myself on his ways and wishes."

"It would have done him a deuced deal more good if he had moulded himself on yours," said Adair, abruptly.

"What a compliment !" she cried, again laughing, this time with unmixed amusement. "Believe me, I am a much wiser woman than I was. Now for another source, an inexhaustible source, of wisdom. I hear the children ; they have just come in."

Adair heard a confusion of young voices in the hall. Mrs. Crichton rose and opened the door. "Come here, darlings," she said. A boy and a girl, one seven or eight, the other a couple of years younger, followed by a toddling rogue who was barely two, answered her call immediately.

"Oh, mother dear, Georgie was such a naughty boy ! there was a big, big dog came jumping and barking at the p'ram ; and Georgie went to strike him with his hoop-stick. Nurse said he might—the dog might—have torn him to pieces !" cried the girl, a pretty flaxen-haired child with big,

dark, wondering eyes and a sweetly curved mouth like her mother's.

"I was afraid he would hurt baby," said George, colouring.

"And you tried to beat him off? That was a brave little chap," cried Adair. "Come and sit on my knee. You ought to be a sailor."

Georgie, after a minute's hesitation, accepted the offer of a seat, and replied, with a serious air :

"No ; I would rather be a groom than a sailor."

"No, Winnie dear," said Mrs. Crichton, lifting her on her lap and taking off her hat, "Georgie must not quarrel with big barking dogs ; but he was not naughty ; he tried to take care of baby."

Here Nurse, a very important-looking elderly person, observed that Master George was quite too venturesome.

"Go and kiss that gentleman," said Mrs. Crichton. "He used to play with mother when she was a little girl."

Winnie got down, her mother passing her fingers lovingly through the child's long hair as she moved away to Adair to displace her brother. She looked very searchingly at him after holding up her mouth for the prescribed kiss, and then asked :

"Are you as old as mother?"

"I am just two years older."

"That is like Winnie and me," said Georgie, who was contemplating them. "Yet Winnie never will do nothing I tell her."

"Of course not," said Adair laughing. "I assure you *I* always did everything your mother told me."

Here baby, who had scrambled on his mother's knee, perceived biscuits and bread and butter on the table, and began to scream for them.

"He'll not eat a morsel at his tea if you give him those, 'm," said Nurse.

"Babs shall have biscuits for himself at tea," temporized the mother.

"Give him to me," asked Adair. "What a jolly little chap!"

Baby looked at him solemnly for a moment, and then slapped his face with all his might.

"Oh, you rude boy!" cried Winnie, scandalized.

"Doesn't like to be taken liberties with, eh?" said Adair, laughing, and giving him back to his nurse, towards whom he was struggling with arms and legs.

"He hasn't had time to learn manners yet, sir," remarked that functionary, and disappeared with her charge.



The two elder children remained for a short time, Winnie contenting herself on Adair's knee, examining the charms which hung to his watch-chain, and putting many questions to her new acquaintance, while George rummaged about the room, asking for this and upsetting that. At last he lifted a solid-looking book.

"Take care, Georgie," cried his mother; "that is father's book, and his mark is in it."

The boy instantly replaced it, and turned away with a celerity that struck Adair. "Father," he thought, "is a terror to evildoers."

"Are you going to live with us?" asked Winnie.

"No such luck, Winnie. I am an unlucky beggar without a home."

Winnie cuddled close to him, pressing her curly head against his chest.

"Mother dear, let him live with us," she cried, appealingly.

"Mr. Adair's own mother will be coming to live with him soon," said Mrs. Crichton, smiling.

"Have you a mother?" asked the child, incredulously. "Old people don't have mothers, do they?"

"Anyway, father wouldn't let him stay here. He doesn't like people," cried George.

"Oh, he likes Mr. Adair," returned his mother. "He wants him to come and dine here."

"Do, do, do come!" exclaimed Winnie, who had evidently taken a sudden fancy to Adair. "I will show you my best big dolly. It has nice fair hair like mine."

"Then it must be charming."

Here the under-nurse came in to say that tea was quite ready.

"You must go, dears," said Mrs. Crichton.

"Oh, I am so hungry!" cried George, and scampered off without saying good-bye. Winnie, also in haste, clasped her arms round Adair's neck and kissed him heartily, then bestowed a rapid hug on her mother, and was gone.

"What jolly little darlings!" exclaimed Adair. "Nice children are enchanting."

"They are profoundly interesting," she returned, with a slight sigh, "but don't fancy they are an un-mixed pleasure; they are so streaked with good and evil, it is a revelation to live with them. I suppose I see this so clearly because I am not naturally a maternal woman."

"Not maternal!" cried Adair, astonished. "Why,

you seem wrapped up in them. And how they love and cling to you !”

“God knows I love them,” she said, with a thoughtful, far-away look in her eyes, “but I haven’t that feeling of personal possession in them that some women enjoy—I suppose it is enjoyment. They are quite separate entities—little individuals—to me. I fancy the older they grow the greater pleasure they will give me—if they do not give me pain.”

“I should not have thought you would admit such a doubt,” cried Adair.

“Ah ! I doubt so much !”

He looked earnestly into her eyes, while he thought, “She is not happy : happiness does not doubt.”

There was a brief pause ; then Mrs. Crichton, speaking with a slight effort and in a changed tone, said, “You remember my sister ? She was very pleased to hear of you. I was with her this morning.” Then, with some slight hesitation, “If you have time to spare, I should be so glad to take you round to see her. She lives quite near ; and she has such a dull, sad life.”

“Yes, of course. I shall be delighted. I have plenty of time.”

"Thank you," said Mrs. Crichton. She did not add another word, but she let her eyes speak to his. What a world of sorrowful gratitude he read in them!

"It is fortunate that I am free this evening," she resumed. "Mr. Crichton dines out with some friends, and does not return to dress, so I shall divide my evening between my sister and the children. I shall just guide you to her house and introduce you; then, if you will stay a little while and talk over old times——"

"It will be a pleasure to me," Adair interrupted.

"I shall not keep you long," she returned, and left the room. She was soon back, and wore the same black lace bonnet, the same dark silk mantle, which he had noticed the day before. It gave him a curious thrill of pain to recognize them. She said, "I am ready," and they left the house together.

After reaching the Bayswater Road they followed it for a few paces, and then turned down a narrow lane or street of very small houses with diminutive gardens adorned by somewhat blackened old poplars. The street was neat and well kept: it was evidently a relic of the days when Bayswater was a country place entitled "Myrtle Grove."

"I must not forget to fix what day you can dine with us," said Mrs. Crichton.

"Pray consult your own engagements, Mrs. Crichton."

"Oh, we have very few. Don't imagine we lead a gay London life. Will Wednesday next suit you?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Do you know Mayne, the explorer, who made that journey through Thibet people talked about some years ago?"

"No, I have never met him."

"He is a friend of Mr. Crichton's, and rather amusing, considering the solemnity of his book. I will try and get him to come. I don't want a big dinner: they are generally so dull. I was rather lucky last night in having Mr. Langley for a neighbour. He is a very clever barrister, and a little good talk does brighten one up wonderfully."

Here they paused at a neat little abode. Mrs. Crichton smiled and kissed her hand to some one in the window whom Adair did not see, because he was looking at his companion.

A small servant-girl opened the door and ushered them into a front parlour, where a very slight, almost attenuated woman lay on a sofa

drawn up to the window. Her eager dark eyes seemed too large for the pale, thin face they illuminated ; her thin grey hair was neatly braided under a pretty little lace cap, and a bright-coloured eider-down coverlet lay upon her feet. She held a piece of knitting and a pair of large wooden neddles. The room looked comfortable and cheerful with spring flowers ; a small fire glowed in the grate, and, though the furniture was common enough, there was a touch of good taste in all the arrangements. The folding doors between the front and back rooms, always hideous, were concealed by portières of gay-flowered chintz, prettily draped.

"I have brought our old friend Norman Adair to see you, dear," said Mrs. Crichton as she entered the room.

"He is very good to let himself be brought," returned Miss Hill, holding out her hand. It is many a long day since I saw an old friend."

"I am very glad to have an opportunity of coming," returned Adair, taking her hand warmly, and feeling himself a lumbering monster in that tiny room beside so fragile a creature as the invalid.

"We have all seen a good many changes since

we last met. I am glad to find yours have been for the better."

"Thank you—yes, considerably for the better ; and Mrs. Crichton, too. I have had the pleasure of meeting her husband and making the acquaintance of those jolly little children of hers."

"Oh," ejaculated Miss Hill, "I suppose your husband *is* all right, Gwendoline ? I don't exactly remember when I last saw him."

"You know, dear Mary, he is greatly occupied, and it is late when he reaches home—much too late to see you," urged Mrs. Crichton, gently.

"Oh, yes, I quite understand," said her sister, in a peculiar tone. "The children are fine healthy little creatures ; at least they are strong enough, if restlessness is any sign of strength. The little girl is rather sweet. I don't care much for the boys."

"There is a candid and impartial aunt for you," said Mrs. Crichton, smiling. "Now I shall leave Norman with you, and return when the little ones are safe in bed : we are going to have an orgy of puzzles and picture-books and stories, as I shall be alone this evening." She stooped to draw her sister's coverlet a little higher, murmuring something to her as she did so. Then she shook hands

with Adair, told him not to forget his engagement for the following Wednesday, and departed.

The invalid watched her through the window as she opened the garden gate, and Adair noticed the softening of her keen eyes as she gazed ; then, with a quick sigh, she turned to him and exclaimed, " She is changed too ! "

" Yes ; she has developed into a more charming woman than I expected ; or rather I was too ignorant, too unlicked a cub to expect anything," said Adair, with a good-humoured smile.

There was a brief pause ; then Miss Hill began an exhaustive cross-examination of her visitor, respecting his mother, his sister, his own career and future plans. She was a shrewd, clever woman, narrowed by the physical limits of her curtailed existence, but strong and enduring. There was nearly ten years' difference between her and her younger sister, and more than twenty in appearance. Hers was a rocky nature, but, given the wand of affection and gratitude to strike it, living waters of truth and tenderness could be evoked from its stony depths.

" From the time your mother left Altringham," Miss Hill resumed, after a pause, " we lost sight of



her. My father died about two years and a half after : of course we had to turn out. The nearest sphere of action, a sphere about as big as a marble, was the county town ; and we spent nearly three years there. Then Gwen met Mr. Crichton, and after six months they married, and we have all been in London since."

"And do you like being in London?" asked Adair.

"Like!" echoed his interlocutor. "How can I like one place more than another? My world is within four walls. Had I the power of moving about, I fancy I should prefer London to any other dwelling-place."

"At any rate," said Adair, seeking anxiously for some consolatory topic, "it must be a comfort to you that your sister is comfortably settled : I fancy Mr. Crichton is well off and—prudent."

"Prudent! Oh, he is uncommonly prudent ; but I don't suppose I should have liked my sister's husband whatever he was. Indeed, I never could understand why she fell in love with him."

"And she did fall in love with him?"

"She did. There could be no mistake about it."

"I am quite sure," cried Adair, "she would never have married a man she did not love."

"Don't be too sure, then. I've known sweet good women driven into matrimony with mere monkeys of men by the whips of poverty."

"Ah, you cannot call Mr. Crichton a monkey," returned Adair, laughing: "he is a very good-looking fellow."

"He is," said Miss Hill, with complete agreement. "So I thought too."

Adair soon after stood up to say good-bye. "I think I shall be some time longer in town," he said; "and, if you will allow me, I shall come and see you sometimes."

"Allow you!" she exclaimed, with a pleasant laugh which reminded him of her sister's. "My dear boy, you know very well it is bestowing a favour to give half an hour to a miserable recluse like myself. If I had the use of my limbs and all my faculties, no one would love the world better than I. I think I am strong enough and honest enough not to cry sour grapes. Come as often as you can spare time for charity, and bring me the echoes of that wonderful, interesting, cruel world away from which fate has shunted me into a corner."

"You may depend upon it, I will come, Miss Hill."

He walked briskly back to the Bayswater Road,

and, turning, carefully took the bearings of Myrtle Grove before he went away to his hotel, his heart and imagination full of the pictures left on them by the last couple of hours. A sweeter picture had never been presented to either than that of Mrs. Crichton and her fair children. Why was it that a curious, doubtful hope for her happiness remained with him, rather than a conviction of its certainty? That, and impatient calculation as to how soon he might call again, chiefly occupied his thoughts for the rest of the evening, although he went to the theatre with a merry party, relations of his friend young Vesey of the —th Light Dragoons, and was one of the merriest among them.

The next morning Adair had a note from Mrs. Crichton: "Pray do not think me tiresome. Mr. Crichton, who is very business-like in his ideas, insists that if I do not repeat my invitation in writing you will forget all about it: so pray remember Wednesday the 30th. My poor sister greatly enjoyed your visit, and if you have time to repeat it, it would be a real boon. You have made a deep impression on my little Winnie, who sends you a kiss."

A new world of interest, of curiosity, of conjec-

ture, seemed to have suddenly opened for Adair, into which he plunged eagerly, without a thought of possible harm to himself or others. He possessed, on the whole, however, a fair share of common sense and self-control ; he therefore resisted his strong inclination to repeat his visits to Sutherland Gardens and Myrtle Grove, especially the latter. He could perceive that his old acquaintance Miss Hill did not love her brother-in-law, and felt sure that whatever her feelings she would not long keep them to herself. It would not be honourable on his part to obtain a key to the puzzle which interested him through this illegitimate channel. So he got over the time as best he could. But, in spite of the many means to be found in London to speed its flight, it did not fly quite as fast as he wished ; and Wednesday seemed slow in coming. It came at last, however, and the hansom which took him to Bayswater punctually at the time appointed seemed the very slowest he had ever met with.

He was shown into the solemn drawing-room, which, being adorned with flowers, looked a little more cheerful, and was welcomed by Mrs. Crichton with kindly ease. She had her two elder children

with her, and wore an Indian embroidered muslin over lilac, with lace and lilac ribbons gracefully disposed about it, and three narrow bands of lilac velvet in classic fashion round her graceful head. Winnie ran to meet and embrace him, but George offered a more sober greeting.

"Mr. Crichton is a little late," said his wife, "but he will be here directly."

"I fancy I am early," returned Adair, and he took Winnie on his knee. "Where is the beautiful dolly I was to see?" he asked.

"Pray do not ask," said Mrs. Crichton. "It has come to a sad end." Adair saw that Winnie's eyes were full of tears and her pretty little mouth quivered. "It was all an accident, and we do not want to annoy poor father by telling him about it."

"Shall I bring you another?" whispered Adair to his little friend—"another as pretty?"

"Oh, yes, please; but"—with a deep sigh—"it won't be the old one."

"Try not to think of it, darling," said her mother.

Here Mr. Crichton entered and gave Adair a cordial welcome. His smile was frank and pleasant, but when in repose there was something grim and lowering about his brow and eyes. The

children went to him frankly enough, and he seemed exceedingly fond of them, ready to tell little anecdotes of their cleverness and to betray other symptoms of paternal weakness.

The other guests now arrived quickly. There was a majority of men, there being but two ladies besides the hostess—one a pretty, meek, silent young wife, who came with a somewhat bumptious husband, the other a very chatty, much-travelled, well-preserved widow, who was gorgeously arrayed and quite appropriated Mr. Crichton.

The celebrated traveller came last ; and Adair was made happy by taking Mrs. Crichton down to dinner. The repast itself was simple, but perfect, ending, Indian fashion, with a curry of the highest merit. The conversation was general, and rather above the average, and Adair admired the unobtrusive tact with which Mrs. Crichton led it, while a certain good-humoured *bonhomie* made her husband an excellent host. Once a sudden gleam of angry disgust flashed from his deep-set black eyes towards his wife, as he said to the traveller, who was about to help himself to an *entrée*, "Don't touch that, Mayne : it isn't fit to eat."

"After all, it is a sort of thing any man would

say," thought Adair. "I am growing crotchety and fanciful."

When the ladies had left, though at first, in compliment to the traveller, the talk for some time was geographical, before long it took a stock-exchange turn, and Adair discovered that his host was greatly taken up with a scheme to build cheap marine villas at a newly-instituted bathing-place on the Kentish coast. He listened with attention, an odd instinctive desire to establish friendly relations with his old friend's husband impelling him to affect a certain degree of interest.

"It's going to be a capital concern," said Mr. Crichton, pushing the very particular port towards him. "If you have a few stray hundreds, you could not do better than take shares."

"I should like to know more about it," said Adair.

"Look in at my office any day, and I'll explain the whole thing to you. Come—no, not to-morrow; that's pretty well bespoke—the day after, some time before one."

"Thank you; I will be sure to come." Adair left the room as soon as he could, accompanied by the explorer and a grey-haired epicurean bachelor

who was considered quite a man of fashion in Bayswater circles.

The fair widow immediately captured Major Mayne, and Adair drew a seat beside his hostess.

"What happened to the doll?" he asked.

"Ah, that was a tragedy! Poor George has rather a violent temper, and quarrels with his sister, who often provokes him. Yesterday there seems to have been a scrimmage in the nursery, and George, by way of annoying Nurse, who was ironing poor Dolly's best frock, shook the table violently. Doll was lying on the floor where George had thrown her; the iron was near the edge; it was very hot; it fell on Dolly's lovely face, and you can imagine the rest. I don't think George intended to work such ruin, for he was quiet in a moment and cried heartily: so we say nothing about it, for Mr. Crichton is occasionally very severe."

"What a young Turk Master George must be! Now, Mrs. Crichton, I want to buy my little sweetheart a doll, and I daren't on my own judgment. Will you come and help me to choose one?"

"It is really too kind of you, Norman——"

"Kind to myself, yes."

"Suppose we take Winnie herself to choose?"



"By all means. But the boy : shall he stay behind ? "

"I think he must, as he has been so naughty."

"Suppose I promise, if he keeps good a whole week, to take him ? "

"Oh, it would bore you frightfully."

"No, I am never bored."

"You are a happy creature ! Well, if you will be so good."

"All right. I'll come to-morrow, about three ? "

"Both Winnie and her mother will be delighted."

After some further talk, during which Adair noticed that Mrs. Crichton's eyes turned somewhat uneasily from time to time towards the door, Mr. Maberly (the bachelor) approached to say that he was sure Mrs. Fairchild, the pretty young *marîée* aforesaid, sang delightfully : would Mrs. Crichton play an accompaniment ?

"Certainly, if I can," she returned, rising readily and going to the piano. A great turning over of music ensued, and at last a ballad was found which Mrs. Fairchild acknowledged she used to sing. She accordingly lifted up her voice, and went feebly through it, in a horrid fright, making

more than one mistake, which her hostess masked as well as she could by the accompaniment.

While this was going on, the rest of the men came upstairs. When it was over, and the widow was having some curiosities of Thibetan work explained to her by Mayne, a bright idea occurred to Adair, who had joined the group at the piano. "What a lot of pretty things you have about!" he said, picking up a quaint Japanese bronze. "I believe ladies are particularly fond of collecting these oddities—especially if they are bargains—and don't much care where they go for them. I remember a friend of my mother's used to find treasures, dirt-cheap, at the pawnbrokers' shops." He looked at his hostess as he spoke, and was annoyed to feel his own colour rise.

Mrs. Crichton raised her eyes to his, with a slight expression of surprise. "I don't think I should ever buy at a pawnbroker's," she said, quietly. "Besides, I have no taste for collecting. Mr. Crichton amuses himself in this way. All these are his purchases."

A sudden conviction seized on Adair's mind, as she spoke, that it was not to buy baubles she had sought that sordid shop in the Edgware Road.

Adair had no further opportunity of speaking with his hostess, though he outstayed the other guests. Mr. Crichton talked with him with cheerful friendliness and reminded him of his promise to call at the office.

"He doesn't seem a bad sort of a fellow," thought Adair, as Crichton made some playful allusion to his wife as the commander-in-chief.

He had said good-night and left the room, when he suddenly remembered he had not asked the address of Mr. Crichton's office, and turned back to inquire it. Mrs. Crichton was standing by the fireplace, and the lights on the mantelpiece fell full upon her. She looked white and distressed, while from the other end of the room came the exclamation "Damned infernal carelessness!" in deep, thunderous tones, from her husband. The words were arrested for a moment on Adair's lips, and, when he did speak, both host and hostess received him smilingly, and, having entered the address in his pocket-book, he went off, thinking it was bad style to be so furious about a servant's mistake, for of course it must have been of the servants Crichton was speaking. Could his old friend Constance Hill, who was such a charming tyrant

in the bygone days, have grown timid as a wife? Bright and gracious as she was, she had a guarded, watchful expression in her eyes—except when alone with him.

The remembrance of her delightful frankness in their *tête-à-tête* interview gave him a curious thrill of mingled pleasure and apprehension—apprehension that in the well and smoothly ordered family into which he had been so cordially welcomed, “all was not gold that glittered.”

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### CHAPTER III.

THIS was the beginning of a rapidly growing intimacy. Adair soon found he was due two or three times a week in Sutherland Gardens, where he was received with open arms by the children, with quiet content which made him feel delightfully at home by their mother, and with cordiality by the master of the house.

It was like having a home, a charming, restful home, though he still sought for the inner truth of his old playfellow's life. Frank as she seemed, there were discordant, contradictory touches in her scheme of thought, as she expressed it at times,

which puzzled him and suggested to him that she rarely let herself go.

He often paid a visit to the invalid in Myrtle Grove, much to her enlivenment, but not exactly to his own satisfaction. Miss Hill was by no means a querulous or complaining sufferer. She bore the many pains and deprivations attendant on spine disease with grim resolution rather than resignation. Her brain was still clear and active, and Adair soon found he could bring her no more acceptable gift than some new book treating of the social, political, or religious movements of the day, or of travels in out-of-the-way places and discoveries of ancient ruins.

These tastes, and a certain strain of cynicism—the outcome, probably, of her misfortune—rendered her rather difficult in the matter of acquaintances. The ordinary class of kindly, narrow, district-visiting elderly young ladies and serious-minded widows who delight in cosseting such invalids as Mary Hill bored her to death, and in their turn they shook their heads over her.

She enjoyed a talk with Norman Adair, and refrained from sneering at his bright, unphilosophic, optimist views. He, however, saw clearly after a

few weeks that she was a difficult charge to her sister, who bore her fretfulness and short temper with angelic patience.

Yet at times Adair could see the profound love and tenderness which spoke in her eyes when they rested on Gwendoline.

"Another supply of flowers, Norman!" she exclaimed, with a well-pleased smile, one fine afternoon towards the end of May, as he entered the little sitting-room in Myrtle Grove. "It is a new thing for me to have a smart young man presenting me with lovely blossoms. I delight in them. Ring, please. I will get my little handmaid to fill the vases." And she bent her head to inhale the perfume of Adair's welcome offering.

"Well, what news have you for me from the world?"

"Nothing very new," returned Adair, who looked more thoughtful and perhaps less joyous than when we first saw him. "I had a long letter from my mother this morning. They are going to the Italian lakes, and they want me to join them."

"Shall you?"

"Not yet. I find London very fascinating. Besides. I have business which will keep me——"

"That business of yours is remarkably elastic. When I first saw you, two months ago, you hoped it would be finished in three weeks. I suppose you'll not be afloat this year?"

"No; I don't think so. I hear there is a place to be sold in my father's part of Galloway (you know he was Scotch), and I am going to have a look at it."

"You lucky boy! What a power money is! Yet rich people are generally odious: even you will grow disagreeable by and by, and then you must not come near me."

"What a terrible prophecy!" cried Adair, laughing. "There are exceptions to this rule, and I hope I shall be one. Your sister, now—she is rich, and I am sure *she* is not odious."

"Rich! Gwen?" in a high key. "She is the veriest pauper! Being married to a rich man only emphasizes a woman's poverty."

"Come, Miss Hill; a woman must share the good things of her husband's life. I am sure I should not like to think my wife wanted anything I could give her."

"No, I dare say not just at present. Wait—wait till familiarity with wealth eats into your

nature and subdues it ; then you will look out for a wife with a lot of money, and she will be welcome to whatever she can buy for herself."

"Oh, believe me, 'If she is not fair to me, What care I how rich she be'?" said Adair, smiling.

Miss Hill looked at him rather indulgently, thinking what a fine-looking, though not handsome, man her old friend had grown, and what a good, honest, resolute face he had.

"But I am making myself disagreeable," she said. "I have been put out this morning. Gwen sent my nephew George here with a message ; she can't come to me ; she has to copy papers or something for Mr. Crichton. I don't like that boy."

"He is a jolly little chap, though, and very like his father."

"He is," she returned, with intense acquiescence. "The other two are not, thank God !"

"Poor Crichton is in the back of your books then?" said Adair lightly.

Miss Hill paused an instant, and then said, quietly and distinctly—

"I hate him. He has destroyed what little was left me of life."

Adair was startled, and felt the awkwardness



which always attends the discussion or avowal of family differences.

“Of course your sister was a great loss to you,” he said, opening a way of escape if Miss Hill chose to give an amiable turn to her observations ; “but, after all, a good marriage——”

“I don’t, on the whole, object to marriage,” she interrupted. “If she had married a man like you—like what you are now—I should not have felt it ; but that man Crichton hates and despises me—poverty is the one unpardonable sin in his eyes ; and he is jealous of me, because his wife loves me. Nothing can change that. Constancy is her special gift. I suppose she finds him all right ; at least she never complains to me ; but her high frank courage is all gone. Even with me she thinks before she speaks. What she ever saw in the man to love, I don’t know, but she did love him well. He wasn’t so bad in those days. Oh, no : he had still something to gain. He used to be nice to me. ‘He would see that I never wanted for anything.’ Well, nor have I ; but my own pittance pays for a good deal. He does add something, of course, or I could not get on ; but then he robbed me of my beloved bread-winner. Ah, I have let myself go ;

but you will not betray me. Norman, *do* you think she is happy? Can she be happy with such a mammon-worshipper? He likes *you* because you are rich—because you are an old friend who does credit to his wife and vouches in a way for her original position. I am a poor creature, a beggar and a disgrace. Do you know, it is two years since I beheld my brother-in-law! Can Gwen be happy with a husband like that?”

“Good God! you surprise and pain me! Yes, I have always thought her happy: I believe she is. A man may be peculiar, yet not a bad husband. He is quick-tempered——”

“Quick!” she interrupted. “If you will not be shocked at such a word on the lips of an invalid who ought to be ‘making her soul,’ as the Irish say, he has an infernal temper—uncertain, treacherous, unreasonable. There! I am false to Gwen, running on in this way; and I am disappointed in her, too: she is afraid of that man—her inferior. Now I will not say another word on this subject—never again. Forget it all, Norman; bury it out of sight.”

“I cannot quite forget, but I will bury it, and try to think less bitterly. Crichton is a very busy man: he——”

"No excuses. I will never change *my* ideas. What have you there, Jumbo?" (this to the diminutive servant who came in with a basket of splendid strawberries.)

"Please, 'm, they're from Mr. Andrews, the fruiterer, for you, mum."

"From Mrs. Crichton?"

"I dunno, 'm."

"I suspect I have to thank you, Norman, for these too."

"I saw some as I was passing near this, and went in to get them, but they were not quite fresh, and the man said he expected others: so I told him to send them in."

"You are an admirable young man, Norman," she said, with a sweet smile, that for the moment made her like her sister. "I love strawberries, and in a monotonous life such as mine one comes to think a good deal of what one eats and drinks. Unfortunately, there are so few things I like."

"Yes, that's unlucky. Then I must say good-bye. I have paid you an unconscionably long visit."

"And done me a world of good. Come again when disposed to do a kind act."

Adair rearranged her cushions for her with kind, deft hands, and bade her adieu.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and he felt he must commune with himself uninterruptedly. His ideas had been confused, his views disturbed, of late, and the conversation he had just had threw fresh light on his own mental condition. He turned into Kensington Gardens and struck across them towards Hyde Park. The soft turf, the shade of the fine old trees, the pretty groups of children—all was bright and pleasant, but Adair saw none of it. He was absorbed in the picture presented by his own imagination of the terrible life which he began to fear his new old friend led. His own observation in the few business transactions he had had with Crichton suggested that his love and greed for money amounted to a passion, and that there was a curious shiftiness about the man. Could he be cruel? If so, what a destiny for so charming a woman as Gwen! and what would be the end thereof? How could she guard her children from the influence, perhaps the caprices, of such a father? Could it be possible that a woman of her mental calibre (for she had more than the ordinary amount of brain-power) was afraid of a man who was certainly her

inferior? Her sister no doubt exaggerated things, but the idea had occurred to him before she had suggested it. Why, such a terrorized existence must be a hell upon earth. A wild fury rose in his heart against the brute who could thus trample upon such a beautiful nature. He felt he could crush out his worthless existence without the smallest hesitation. And then how clearly he saw her, the rich grace of her rounded figure, the sweet mouth, the eyes, the fine thoughtful eyes, that could laugh with so keen an appreciation of humour, or dwell on her children with such infinite tenderness, or shelter themselves behind a certain cautious quiet that defied penetration! What a woman to have beside you all the days of your life, and to love you as she could and would love a true-hearted husband! What right had such a man as Crichton to a noble, adorable companion? Then the full light pierced to Adair's soul in spite of the curtains of plausibility in which he had wrapped it, and he exclaimed, half aloud—

“This is a pretty pass for an honest gentleman, as I hoped I was, to be fathoms deep in love with another man's wife! but I am; and I'd rather bear all, all I can see before me, than forego the delight

of being with her, to hear her speak, to feel, as I do in some unaccountable way, that she trusts me. Perhaps I may be of use to her some day," he continued to muse as he unconsciously slackened his pace. "She has no brother, no near relative. I might act a brother's part—though with infinite caution. Whatever suffering comes of it, it will be to me only. She has no thought of me—of any one; she is loyalty itself to her husband; she has no room in her heart save for her children. I would never offend her by look or word. I will be her true, devoted friend, but I *will* gratify my own heart by loving her with all my soul and with all my strength." He walked on for some little way, absorbed in a heavenly vision of the woman who had utterly fascinated him and struck to the hitherto untouched depths of his inner life, maturing and developing with sudden electric power the slumbering forces of his more serious manhood. He was glad he had not had any temptation to go to sea again. Indeed, he now knew he would not have gone. He would hereafter; he was not going to fritter away his life in ease and idleness; but he must ascertain how matters stood with Gwendoline, and in what way he could serve her. before he left

England. Then it would be wiser to go. These meditations brought him to St. James's Park. As he passed by the mounted sentries at the Horse Guards, to his great surprise and annoyance he ran up against Mr. Crichton, who was evidently in deep reflection. "What a bad countenance the fellow has!" was the thought that flashed through Adair's brain as his eyes fell upon him.

"Halloo, Crichton!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing so far west?"

"What! Adair?" he returned, with the smile which changed his face so wonderfully. "I have been trespassing on your ground. I have been interviewing some of the people at the Admiralty."

"Indeed! Have they offered you the command of the Channel fleet?"

"No—a much better offer for my purposes: they want me to send out a cargo of provisions to the troops in China; and I don't think I'll make a bad thing of it. By the way, would you care to go to the Mansion House ball to-morrow night? It is to be an extra fine affair."

"Thank you. I don't think I should know any one there."

"Mrs. Crichton and I are going."

"Oh ! I thought you had declined."

"Well, we had, but I met Black this morning (he is the Lord Mayor, you know), and he seemed anxious we should go. Very polite of him : so I promised we should. I am on my way home now to tell my wife. I say, Adair, no time for a new dress, eh ?"

"Don't be too sure : there's such a thing as milliners' magic."

"I don't think they could manage it. By the bye, you know we are going to the country on Saturday?"

Adair nodded.

"I've found an old-fashioned little place, near Welwyn, on the Great Northern Line. You must come and see us there : pretty country, nice drives and walks, good air. Shall I send you a card for to-morrow night ?"

"I should be very glad to go, if I am to meet you ; you'll look after me in the Land of the Stranger."

Crichton laughed, and said good-bye. Adair went on his way. He had heard about this ball, and remembered that Mrs. Crichton was very glad to have escaped it. She was busy preparing for their move to the country, and seemed to enjoy the prospect of the *villeggiatura*. He was sorry to



think she should be troubled and wearied dressing and going to this festivity, merely because her husband's vanity was tickled by a personal invitation from the chief magistrate himself.

Before he reached the rooms where he had established himself, he made up his mind to pay an early visit to Sutherland Gardens the following day, a vague impression growing on him that he might be of use to Mrs. Crichton. If—if he could but serve her !

The next morning, however, he had himself an early visitor, an old messmate who happened to be passing through town. They had much to say to each other, and, though longing to get rid of him, Adair did not like to be uncivil : it was therefore half-past two before he reached his destination.

“ Yes, sir, Mrs. Crichton is at home ; but she is not very well, and said she would not see any one.”

A curious sense that there was something seriously wrong made him exceedingly reluctant to accept this denial. Perhaps if she was in any trouble Gwendoline might confide in him.

“ Pray take my card. Possibly Mrs. Crichton might admit me.”

“ Certainly, sir. Pray walk in.” And he was

ushered into the morning room which had grown to be his elysium.

He paced restlessly to and fro, feeling unreasonably disturbed. Soon the servant returned, to say Mrs. Crichton was coming down to see him. Then he stood still, waiting.

In a few minutes she came. He never forgot any detail of her dress, of her aspect, that day. She wore a loose morning gown of lilac and white, the long folds of which made her look very tall ; her hair was looser than usual, as if she had not cared to dress it ; and her face was very white. But her eyes struck him most of all : there was a strained, terrified look in them that set his heart beating with a wild desire to carry her away from all sorrow and fear and trouble.

"It is good of you to come so soon again," she began, in a measured tone, as if she was carefully controlling her voice, and with a sort of sad smile.

"You are not well," he returned, taking the hand she offered, and shocked to find how burning and unsteady it felt. "You are not fit to go to this ball to-night." He looked earnestly into her eyes as he spoke.

"Oh, yes, I am ; the doctor says I am. Mr.

Crichton was rather put out this morning about my being unwell, so he went round to our doctor, who, unfortunately, lives close by, and brought him back to see me, and he says there is nothing the matter with me—nothing !” And she laughed.

Her laugh decided Adair. “Look here, Gwen—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Crichton: there’s something very wrong with you. Can I not help you? Fancy I am your next of kin for the present. I wish I were !”

“So do I! Oh, so do I!” She drew her hand over her brow, and then rested the tips of her long white fingers on the table and paused. “Have you ever been in Nuremberg, Norman,” she asked, turning her eyes away from his, “and seen the terrible Iron Maiden there?—a woman’s figure that opens, and when the unfortunate victim was put inside, the doors, which are studded with long spikes, closed upon him, and he was left to die. Perhaps the worst part of the punishment was that the whole night before, the criminal was obliged to kneel in contemplation of the figure in which he was to be entombed. Norman,” she exclaimed, in a different tone, and clasping her hands together, “I have been kneeling in contemplation of my

supreme moment of torture all last night and all this day. I am such a despicable coward!" No

"Just tell me what I can do," said Adair, briefly, afraid to trust himself with speech.

"I will! I will!" She unconsciously grasped his wrist. "I am going to be—oh, so mean and unprincipled, you will despise me; but I *must* ask you. Perhaps some day you will understand why I am in this desperate strait. No, do not look at me, Norman. I only want money, a great deal of money, and at once—immediately."

"How much?" He held his arm steady, and did not attempt to clasp her poor, tremulous hands.

"More than two hundred pounds. I will tell you why."

"No, it is not necessary. All I want is to relieve you from this awful state of distress."

"But you must do more for me, Norman, than give me money, and I must explain. I—I have pawned my jewels, my necklace that my husband values so much, and you—that is, will you get them for me?"

"Yes, certainly; but we must be quick."

"You have saved me, Norman!" she exclaimed, pressing her hand upon her heart, and then again grasping his wrist with an expressive shrinking

almost against him. "I am so awfully afraid of my husband ; he is so fierce—so strong." And her fingers pressed upon his throbbing pulse with more force than he had thought they possessed.

"Good God !" cried Adair, his eyes aflame, "what do *you* know of his strength ?"

"No, no ! of course nothing ! It is my own miserable cowardly imagination. If I had been stronger and braver I should never have made the mistakes I did, and——"

"But he loves you ? he must love you ?" interrupted Adair.

"Yes, yes, sometimes, in his way." A wave of colour passed over her face, and a slight shudder as of loathing quivered through her frame. She slowly relaxed her hold, and heaving a deep sigh of relief, said, "But I shall do better now—now you have set me free. Oh, Norman, do you understand that I can never repay you ?—that I am begging this great sum from you as alms ? Oh, how shameful it is !"

"No, it is not. I am one of your oldest friends. I am well off. I throw away far larger sums for mere self-indulgence. To have done this will always be a source of pleasure to me ; to help you in any way is all I ask. I swear to be your faithful

friend and brother. Now, there is no time to be lost. I must go to my bank in the Strand."

"And I will bring you the tickets which you must show, if you will be so very good as to do this for me."

"Yes, of course. Go, dear Mrs. Crichton, bring me those things."

She went swiftly away. Adair stood quite still, in deep and painful thought. This tender, delicate, beloved woman was in truth beyond his reach. What was the utmost he could do for her?—merely purchase here or there a few minutes' reprieve from the continuous torture of her life. She was hopelessly entangled in a mesh the threads of which no knife of human workmanship could sever. And in the coming years would her children bring her more of pleasure or of pain? It was a very open question. His heart bled for her, and he thanked Heaven he had acted on the presentiment which urged him to call upon her that day. Had he not come to her in her hour of need, she would never have sent for him. But she interrupted his musing, and gave him the tickets she brought, adding a few words descriptive of the jewels, and the address where he would find them.

"Piccadilly? That's all right. My bank is in Pall Mall."

"You'll come back as quickly as you can?"

"Trust me." He was going, when he paused. "Any chance of Crichton returning before me?" he asked.

"It is impossible to say," she returned, the colour which came back to her cheek fading so swiftly that he feared she would faint.

"For God's sake don't lose heart," he exclaimed. "I'll manage it. Before I come in I'll ask for him; if he is at home I'll pay a short visit to Miss Hill's, where you will find your things."

"Ah, yes! Well thought, dear Norman! But I do hope there will be no need; Mary has no idea of my transactions; she would be shocked and distressed."

"How the deuce does she imagine you are to manage, then?" cried Adair, impatiently. "But I'm off. You shall see me back again before five-thirty, if I have any luck."

What words could describe that waiting? Every sound of the bell, the pause of a tradesman's cart at the entrance or of a visitor's carriage next door, the tread of a passer-by who seemed to linger at the steps, the foot of the distributor of circulars who mounted them to thrust his announcement into the

letter-box—each set her heart beating, her nerves thrilling. It seemed to her that now she was on the verge of deliverance the danger of discovery was tenfold greater than it had ever been. What ages seemed crowded into the bare three hours he had been away! And at last when he came she could hardly utter a word; dark shadows lay before her eyes and bespoke exhaustion both of mind and of body.

Adair came in empty-handed. "Oh, it is all right!" he exclaimed, in reply to her eager eyes; "only I would not bring the things in till I was sure the coast was clear. Now I'll get them and dismiss the cab," which he proceeded to do, and Mrs. Crichton strove to recover herself, while she breathed a thanksgiving for this great deliverance.

"Just look through the cases and see that they are right," said Adair, putting them on the table before her.

"I will, but in my own room. It is getting late." She gathered them together and ran upstairs with them.

She returned quickly. "They are quite right," she said, and stopped; then clasping her hands together and holding them out, she almost whis-



pered, "I think you have saved my life, Norman! I dare not think of what might have been——"

"Do *not* think of it," he said, and took her hands in both his own for a moment. "But promise me one favour."

"Yes, willingly," she said, without an instant's hesitation.

"You may," he returned, with a certain sad dignity. "You may safely promise anything I ask. It is, never again to run so great a risk. Always remember that all I possess is at your service. Now I had better disappear. We'll meet at the ball."

That evening, as Mrs. Crichton was nearly ready, her husband came into her dressing-room. "Mind you put on *all* your jewels to-night," he said. "You won't be such a blaze as some of them, but you've a sprinkling of deuced fine stones, I can tell you."

"I cannot put on quite all I have," said his wife, smiling. "It would be rather a jumble." And she drew her jewel-case towards her.

"Are they all there?" he asked, with a curious gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, except what I have just taken off."

Mr. Crichton drew a chair, and began deliberately

to examine the contents of the case, with which he seemed satisfied.

"It is an infernal nuisance your having had that headache this morning," he said, rising. "You look pale and washed out. By George! you were so queer and fidgety, you put some strange notions into my head."

"It was a nervous headache. I have had one or two lately," she replied, with a sigh. "I have had a good deal to do and to think of."

"Lord's sake, don't set up nerves!" he exclaimed. "What on earth *have* you to do, but to sit here all day and have everything found for you? I say, Sarah," to the maid, who came in at that moment, "haven't you a rouge-pot anywhere about? Your missis looks as white as a ghost." And, laughing harshly, he went away.

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#### CHAPTER IV.

A FEW days after the ball the Crichtons left town for their summer quarters, and for nearly a fortnight Adair received no communication from Mrs. Crichton. However, he often heard of her and the children from Miss Hill, to whom he paid frequent

visits. Apart from the reflected interest she possessed for him, he liked to talk with her. She was shrewd and far-seeing, in spite of some crotchets and rather strong prejudices. Her heart was full of her sister, who had been as a daughter to her, though the difference in their years was not nearly so great as it seemed. But, though willing to talk about Constance and the children as much as ever Adair liked, she never again mentioned her brother-in-law.

One morning early in June, Adair sat reading the paper after breakfast, in an exceedingly restless and dissatisfied state of mind. He was sick of London, bored to death with dinners, nauseated with balls, teas, receptions, and all social usages, yet anchored to the hot, dusty, noisy city by his intense desire to see Mrs. Crichton and receive from her lips the explanation he was longing to hear and he suspected she was anxious to give. He was burning to look on her face, to hear her voice. How was he to live through his life without her? And yet he was capable of thanking God that she did not give him a thought that might not at most be bestowed upon a sympathetic brother or a useful friend. How was he ever to tear himself away

from England, from the chance of being at hand to help her in any time of trouble? For she would be in trouble as long as her husband lived, "and he is as strong as a horse," mused Adair, throwing aside his paper and standing up, with the intention of going out—when a telegram was handed to him: "Can you call here this afternoon? Reply." It was signed Crichton, and dated from his office.

Need it be said that Adair faithfully kept the appointment, in a state of burning curiosity as to the tidings which awaited him?

Crichton welcomed him effusively, but, except a brief assurance that the wife and bairns were as "fit as fiddles," he did not mention them. His object in sending for Adair was to lay the project of another company before him and induce him to take shares and join the direction. Even to the sailor's inexperienced sense the affair seemed unsound, and he did not commit himself.

"Give me those papers and calculations. I'll study them a bit and give you my answer in a day or two," he said. "I am keeping a few thousands free in case I meet with a chance of buying a 'residential property,' as the agents call it."

"What!" exclaimed Crichton, "throw away

your money on land? Couldn't make a greater mistake. Land has had its day, I can tell you. Suppose you come down to our little cabin with me by the six-ten train, stay over Sunday, and study this matter in the quiet of the country. It's a pretty, fresh little place. The missis will be pleased to see you. We can't put you up, but there's a nice clean inn in the village, where they'll make you comfortable, not ten minutes from our place. Say yes, and I'll let you go; for I have fifty things to get through before I leave. Meet me at King's Cross, hey?"

"I shall be delighted, and thank you," returned Adair, wondering if Crichton could hear his heart, so strongly did it beat against his ribs.

So in a moment the meeting for which he had been pining was brought about.

It was a glorious evening when they reached the small station of Stanfield, where they found a somewhat battered, dusty, low phaeton and a rough, ungroomed, sturdy pony waiting for them. An equally ungroomed boy and Mr. Crichton's capriciously petted son and heir were in charge of the vehicle. The child ran to kiss his father, and stood by while he gave some directions to the porter; and

Adair noticed that the little fellow stole watchful glances at Crichton's face, as if to ascertain what his mood was. But the father was in a temper as sunny as the skies, and tenderly embraced his boy. "I haven't a very stylish turn-out, you see," he said, good-humouredly. "But we must have something to go to and from the trains ; so I hired this trap with the house—got the whole concern a bargain. You see this place is quite out of the beat of summer visitors ; heard of it by the merest chance," etc. ; so he went on detailing particulars of his agreement and chuckling over his own acuteness, while Adair feasted his eyes on the richly wooded undulating country, and the grey-green of the meadows now almost ripe for the scythe. "We'll stop and secure your room as we pass through the village," resumed Crichton, "and leave your bag."

"Oh," cried little George, "mother and me, we saw to all that as we came along ; then she went back by the fields."

"Oh ! all right. I'm glad she thought of it. I sent her a wire as soon as you left to-day. You see she has me under her thumb ; dare not bring home a guest without giving due notice." And he laughed exultingly.

Leaving the village, they turned down a delightful green shady lane, which soon descended to a broad, shallow, clear stream, through which carriages drove, while foot-passengers were accommodated with a much-mended picturesque old timber foot-bridge. The opposite side rose rather steeply. The lower part of the slope was covered with soft, vividly green turf, bordered by shrubs and flowers, and crowned by a small old-fashioned cottage so covered with clematis and roses that no one could see whether the walls were of brick or of stone.

"There's Riverhill," said Mr. Crichton, pointing to it with his whip.

"And there's mother and Winnie going to the gate," cried George. Adair had already caught sight of some white drapery fluttering among the trees. But the round-barrelled pony was now scrambling up the rough, stony, steep ascent from the ford, and soon stopped, standing sideways across the road, before a little green gate, at which stood Mrs. Crichton.

"Jump out," said Crichton. "I'll drive round to the farm-yard."

The next moment Adair held Mrs. Crichton's

hand and was striving to steady his own. As their eyes met, she blushed deeply and her eyes sank ; but this tempting manifestation did not mislead Adair ; it only filled him with regret that the sense of obligation to him should be painful to her. He covered the momentary awkwardness by catching up Winnie, who clamoured for his notice, and bestowing sundry kisses on her bright face.

"I began to think I was never to see you again," he exclaimed, with his ordinary frank cheerfulness, as they walked together to the house. "But I heard of you frequently from your sister."

"Yes ; I am so grateful to you for going to see her. Poor dear thing, it is a sad time for her when I am away. I should love to have her down here, or anywhere in the country ; but it is simply impossible." Here baby toddled out to meet them, and steadied himself by his mother's finger. "Don't my little gipsies look brown and well ?"

"They do, indeed—and you too. I am glad to see you have a touch of healthy bronze—sun-kisses."

She raised her eyes to his with something of an effort.

"I am much—much better, thank *you*," she said, with some emphasis and a smile that conveyed to



Adair a world of gratitude and trust. "The lawn is my drawing-room on fine days," she resumed; "it is a little dark indoors." And she led the way to the farther side of the house, where there was a view over a more open country, with a distant line of misty blue hills. Here was a table on which were a work-basket, some books, and Winnie's doll, with several chairs, large and small.

Mrs. Crichton and her guest sat down, and fell into ordinary conversation about the invalid sister and Adair's own people. There was no further sign of embarrassment on her side, and she grew every minute calmer and more at ease. Yet it was different from their former intercourse. They had a secret between them unknown to her husband, and it seemed an indissoluble link binding them together. Moreover, it gave a secret meaning to every word that passed between them, a sense of union that separated them from all others.

Mr. Crichton soon joined them. He was in a contented frame of mind, and got through a very appetizing little dinner with scarce any fault-finding. He talked intelligently enough on Indian topics. Mrs. Crichton proposed coffee out of doors, to which her husband assented.

"Yes, it is a pretty country," he said, in reply to a remark of Adair's as they sat smoking their cigarettes in the delicious fragrant coolness of the summer evening. "Just the country for riding. But I don't keep horses now. In fact, a horse *and* a wife are too great a strain on ordinary resources ; and *I* chose a wife, the costlier of the two."

"How can you allow him to utter such blasphemy, Mrs. Crichton ?" said Adair, looking keenly at her to see how she took her husband's polite speech.

"I cannot dispute its truth, you see," she said, quite placidly. "Moreover, you cannot sell a wife at Tattersall's if you wish to curtail your expenses."

"Exactly!" returned Crichton, with a laugh. "Never mind, Gwen, I don't want to sell you just yet."

The remark suggested a happy thought to Adair. "I have been tempted to buy a couple of horses," he said, "and now I scarcely know what to do with them, for my plans are all unsettled. Do you think I could find stabling for them here? And perhaps you would help me to exercise them. We might see a good bit of the country together. You used to ride in former times, Mrs. Crichton," turning to her: "suppose you try again."

"Oh, no : I am afraid that rambling about on my poor old shaggy pony could hardly be considered riding," said Mrs. Crichton, with a pleasant, musical laugh.

"No, no : I don't fancy she could stick on now : somehow she seems to have lost all her nerve ; and she used to be plucky enough."

Adair kept his eyes on the ground, and did not dare to raise them for a minute or two, knowing they might betray too much. "Well, we'll have a look at the inn stables," he said, "if you like the idea ; and we might start a dog-cart for madam's benefit."

"Like the idea ! Why, my dear fellow, it's first-rate ! I should enjoy some riding beyond everything. I can't tell you how I missed my horses at first. But, by Jove, *you* must drive the dog-cart : driving I never did care for."

While he spoke, Mrs. Crichton rose and went softly away into the house.

Adair looked after her.

"Oh, never mind," said the husband. "She's gone to look at the youngsters—always does. She's a deuced sight too fidgety about them : she's as weak as water, and gives them their own way."

"I never saw better-behaved children in my life," cried Adair.

"My good fellow, you don't live in the house with them."

The stabling proved good enough for Adair's purpose, and the horses were soon established in the village, much to Crichton's satisfaction—rather too much, it seemed to his guest, for he contrived to stay away from business very frequently, and rode too many stone to be quite good for the steeds. Moreover, though Adair insisted on his riding them alternately, he was glad to let them rest when Crichton did go to town, and so his project of taking Mrs. Crichton out driving was defeated for some time. Then came a rush of business, and Crichton went to the City with tolerable regularity. But, in spite of all difficulties and every *contretemps*, it was a heavenly time to Adair. There were hours of quiet intercourse, of unuttered sympathy, when the sense of his beloved companion's trust in him, of her reliance on him, lapped him in elysium. Yet a jury of the severest matrons might have listened without a frown to every word they said to each other. They were

very seldom alone together. If Crichton was away the children were always there—often the nurse.

“A telegram for you, ma’am,” said the parlour-maid, whom they had brought down with them, coming from the house just as Mrs. Crichton and Adair began to conjecture that something must have detained Mr. Crichton.

“He is not coming to-night,” she said, handing it to her companion.

“Will not return to-day. Letter by first post to-morrow,” was all it said.

“I had no idea he had anything on hand likely to call him away,” remarked Mrs. Crichton, thoughtfully.

“It seems to me he is not coming back to-morrow,” observed Adair.

“No? Well, we shall know all in the morning.”

And they proceeded to dine very cheerfully and happily. Winnie and George were allowed to sit up till it was quite dark, and Adair showed them how to play backgammon. Then he forced himself to leave his paradise earlier than usual, saying he would not come over next morning till after breakfast.

It behoved him to watch over her carefully. She was too innocent of evil to heed appearances,

and her husband, careless and wrapped up in himself, would see nothing save his own pleasure and convenience until some accident roused his jealousy, and then he would be merciless. He lay long awake, thinking of the life which lay before this woman who had entered into his soul and dwelt there ; but this was nothing new to him now. Yes, she was in bondage from which nothing could liberate her, and her master, though nearly twenty years her senior, might live to any age, he was so strong, so careful.

Mrs. Crichton was established in her out-door morning room, writing, when he joined her. " Mr. Crichton has gone to Glasgow," she said, as soon as they had exchanged greetings. " Something has gone wrong about his latest company : he is afraid some one is guilty of double-dealing : so he is gone, breathing out threatenings and slaughter."

" I wish he would stick to his regular business," said Adair, taking the newspaper and throwing himself on the grass, where he could look up unobtrusively into the eyes he loved. " These by-ways of money-making so often lead to quagmires and shifting sands."

Mrs. Crichton finished addressing her letter, and

leaned back in her chair without speaking for a moment ; then she said, very gravely, as if to herself, " I am sometimes frightened at my husband's eagerness to make money. It is like insanity." She shuddered. " You must have noticed it, Norman."

He nodded his head, anxious not to check by any words her inclination to speak out her thoughts.

" Yes, any one living with us must observe it ; but no one really knows its full extent as I do. I fear, as it increases (and it does increase)—I fear the effect it may have on the children's future—their education."

" But he is very well off ? "

" Yes, I believe so. There is abundant internal evidence that he never spends more than half he might." And she smiled rather sadly. " Perhaps I ought not to speak in this strain ; but, Norman, you are very safe, and I have been brooding in silence over so much that makes me uneasy, that the relief of speaking out my fears to a safe sympathetic friend is too great a temptation."

" You know I am both," he said, in a low tone, not allowing his eyes to meet hers.

" Yes. I have never trusted any living soul

since I was married. Mary is out of the question, for——” She stopped suddenly, and then resumed in a different tone : “ Do not join any more of Mr. Crichton’s companies, Norman : you must not be robbed by the husband as well as the wife.” She flushed crimson.

“ Mrs. Crichton, you are unkind ! ” he exclaimed.

She did not seem to hear him. Claspings her hands, she went on in a low tone : “ What would have become of me that day if you had not saved me ? I tremble to think of it. He can be terrible ; and he is so strong.”

“ My God ! do you mean to say that—you have suffered from his strength ? ” cried Adair, white with an agony he could not hide.

“ Oh, no, no ! not that ; he has never quite struck me ; but I always fear—— And then, you know, he would have been in his rights. Think, if *your* wife had pawned her jewels, the jewels you had given her ! Oh, Norman, it was too disgraceful ! ”

“ That depends. I don’t know why you did it.”

She did not answer. There was a pause.

“ They are all right now ? ” asked Adair.

“ At present, quite right. Do you know he—Mr. Crichton—has such an extraordinary pro-



phetic instinct as regards anything that touches his property, his interest, that he seemed to divine why I was unwell—why I wanted to escape that ball? He turned over the whole contents of my—no, not *my*—of *his* jewel-case which he lends me.” Adair muttered something. “Imagine, then, how I blessed you. But I am saying far more than I intended. I am ashamed of myself.”

“For heaven’s sake, snatch what relief you can, and never let yourself be in such a strait again. You know you need not,” he said, meaningly. “Now I am not going to let you dwell on these painful topics, unless you want me to help you out of the lion’s den.”

“That I never shall, Norman : I must live and die in it.”

“Then I propose that after luncheon we take a long drive by Knebworth, and let Winnie and George come. My groom will take care of one of them behind : he is a steady fellow. The country will look lovely after these last two showery days.”

“Yes, thank you, Norman : it will revive me. How good and thoughtful you are!”

## CHAPTER V.

THE barrier of reserve was now quite broken down, and, though Mrs. Crichton did her best to avoid the subject of her own difficulties and sufferings, bit by bit the picture of her married life was unrolled to Adair's eyes. Nor was she aware how vividly she painted it.

Left wretchedly poor at the death of their father, the sisters moved from the parsonage to the neighbouring county town, where Gwendoline eked out their small income by teaching in one of the "establishments for young ladies," which had not at that date been converted into "colleges" or "high schools." Here she met Crichton, who was passing a few days with the family of one of her pupils. He was fascinated, and knew no rest till he had secured what, for the moment, seemed to him a pearl of great price.

Later the pearl seemed a trifle too costly. His air of disinterested generosity, the glamour of unconscious deceitfulness which enwraps a man dazed and blinded by fierce passion, overwhelmed Gwendoline with a sense of gratitude, and the respon-

siveness naturally awakened by the exhibition of such ardent feeling made her fancy she loved in return. Had this ardour toned down, as, thank God, it often does, into kindly considerate friendship, she would have loved him warmly and well to their lives' end. But his nature forbade such a blessed result.

"No woman who is very poor ought to marry," she said, one day when they had been discussing an article in one of the graver magazines on French marriages. "She is perhaps felt to be less a burden by a poor man than by a rich one; she can do more to help in a humble *ménage* than in a grand one: still, she is a burden; and to wed a wealthy man when you have nothing, is to become a life-long dependant. I shall never forget how I felt when George said, one day, he wished to ride and had no horse, 'You see, Gwen, if you had brought some funds into the concern I should not have an empty stable.' I was overwhelmed with a sense of misery and beggary I cannot describe. Of course that was just at first. Things do not affect me now in that way."

"Why did you not threaten to leave him?" cried Adair: "it would have brought him to his senses if you had shown that you knew your own value."

"But, unfortunately, I felt at the moment that my value was as nothing compared to that of a horse. And as to going away, where could I go? I had nothing I could call my own, and no relative or friend who would have helped me or taken my part. Then I hoped when Georgie was born things would go better; and they did, for a while. There were interludes of hope and peace: but they have grown shorter. It was these gleams of hope that destroyed me. Perhaps had I sooner recognized that I had to fight for my life I might have asserted myself. But I always wished to win him by fair means—to influence him." She laughed, not at all bitterly. "As if anyone could influence him who had no pedestal of gold to stand upon. So I sank lower and lower under his rule."

Later Adair gathered that on his marriage Crichton voluntarily promised his wife that her sister should never want for any comfort. This promise she accepted readily, as in marrying she withdrew her own contributions to her sister's maintenance. What, then, was her dismay to find that the payments of the small quarterly sums he had suggested as an addition to the invalid's income were soon very reluctantly made, then

irregularly, then the amount diminished on the plea of making it up next time—which he usually failed to do!

This led to his wife's first difficulties. She was tempted to pay certain little debts incurred for her sister out of her housekeeping allowance. On telling her husband this as a reason for urging him to make good his shortcomings, she roused such a storm of threats of vengeance in the shape of a personal attack on the poor invalid that she never dared to be candid again, but went on, hoping against hope to save something from her allowance or to coax an occasional gift out of her lord and master when he was in a good humour—an event which grew rarer each year. Thus Mrs. Crichton got into a tangle of difficulties, was tempted to try the fatal expedient of borrowing money, and was charmed to find with what ease she procured it. Then came the awful necessity for repayment, with interest, and she was driven to pledge some of her jewels to put herself straight. So she got into a terrible groove, borrowing to make up deficits in the winter, pledging her jewels to pay when they went out of town for the summer, until her life was a continued terror, and every day made confession

more and more impossible, and her sense of degradation more and more pitiable.

"I grew so accustomed to this system," she said to Adair one evening as they sat talking indoors after the children had gone to bed, for it was chill and breezy, "that at any time I would take a brooch or a pair of ear-rings to exchange for a little ready money, rather than ask Mr. Crichton for it. I do think, Norman, his craze about money is insanity."

"What! used you to go all the way to Piccadilly?" asked Adair, shrewdly.

"Oh, no: for small transactions I went to a shabby little place in the Edgware Road. I wonder if you could ever realise what my sense of relief and safety is when I reflect that my jewels are safe and that I am clear of debt?" She stretched out her hand frankly to Adair, who took and held it gently, loyally, for a moment, looking at her fair sweet face in wonder, as a vision of the long years of continuous torture which she had endured flashed across his brain.

"You were awfully weak!" he exclaimed; "but, my God! who could blame you? And you speak of this man without anger!"

"Oh, the period when I felt racking passions of

indignation and despair has long gone by. Mr. Crichton is now a tremendous necessity to be reckoned with. And, Norman, a mother dares not despair. I must live on, and live with him, keeping the home as peaceful as I can, for the sake of my darlings. God knows how bitterly I regretted the birth of each ; but now they are in life, I give mine to them utterly. Perhaps the cruellest effect of all is the loss of my self-respect. Shall I ever win it back ? But at least I have the courage of my cowardice, and will never attempt to leave my husband, because it would mean either parting from my children or separating them from their father ; and he is fond of them now. His affection for them may yet humanize him, if their increasing cost does not displease him. Besides, I don't suppose I could get a separation. He has never absolutely ill-treated me, and I have been fed, clothed, and lodged adequately. Oh, Norman ! it is half-past nine. I have talked to you the whole evening of my hopeless troubles ; and you are so patient. But, though it may bore you, it seems to lighten my load ; and Mr. Crichton will be back on Saturday."

" You never tire or trouble me," said Adair, rising

and pacing to and fro slowly. "I want you to give me a promise," he said, pausing opposite her and grasping the top of the chair on which he had been sitting. "Will you?"

"What is it?" she asked, with a smile.

"When you are in any difficulty or strait whatever, let me know. I ask nothing more than to help you."

"I earnestly pray I may never want help again, Norman. I will try not. As it is, you have given me courage enough to speak seriously to Mr. Crichton about the allowance to my sister. I am determined to press for this."

"You ought," said Adair. "Be firm about this. Poor soul! it is cruel to curtail any pleasure or comfort she can enjoy. Why, he cannot be human, to torture any fellow-creature as he does you."

"Part of the torture he is unaware of," she said, thoughtfully. "I think, Norman, I shall take advantage of my brief freedom to run up and see my sister to-morrow. Mr. Crichton is not pleased when I spend a day 'out.'"

"Do. I will stay here as head-nurse in your absence and look after the youngsters."

She looked at him with suddenly awakened



understanding as the idea dawned upon her of his tender care to guard her against misrepresentation.

"Thank you," she said, in a low voice, as a soft colour slowly overspread her cheek. "You are a true friend."

"I think I may claim that title, Mrs. Crichton. Treat me as one. I shall feel honoured."

"I will," she said, then paused, and repeated, "I will."

"Good-night, then. What train will you take to-morrow?"

"There's one at nine-thirty. I should like to catch it."

"All right. I'll be here by nine and drive you to the station."

The end of September saw the Crichtons settled for the winter in Sutherland Gardens.

Adair had forced himself to accept an invitation to Scotland, and another to Yorkshire, for shooting. He was nervously anxious to avoid rousing Crichton's or indeed any one's suspicions as to his own devotion to his old friend and playfellow. He realized how pitiless a man they had to deal with, and that any breach which could possibly come

between Gwendoline and her children would be death to her. He sometimes feared his own power over himself as time deepened and broadened the stream of passionate affection which welled up within his heart. But he underrated his own strength.

At last he permitted himself to return and call on Mr. Crichton at his office. He found that gentleman looking stern and gloomy and generally forbidding. However, he welcomed Adair cordially enough, and asked him to dinner the next day.

"Mrs. Crichton has not been very well," he said, in reply to Adair's inquiries. "The baby has been ailing, and his mother has been in a desponding mood about him, also about her sister, who is, she fancies, going to die. It would be a great release if she did. Whatever you do, Adair, don't marry a woman with an ailing sister."

"I don't think I should mind that, if I liked the woman," returned Adair, good-humouredly; and, gladly taking advantage of a clerk's entrance with a slip of paper, he added, "I see you are busy: so I'll postpone the rest of my visit till dinner-time to-morrow."

"All right," replied Crichton. "It is my lawyer.

His are golden moments, and, unfortunately, the gold comes out of my cash-box."

Adair's heart beat fast as he entered the familiar precincts of his beloved's home. He ventured to go rather early; and all the gloom and probable pain in the future, with its almost inevitable trials, were swallowed up in the unutterable joy of seeing her again, of feeling her soft hand in his, and of looking into her inscrutable lovely eyes—for to him they were lovely.

She was alone, and trying to read by the fire-light, so he was not able to see her face very distinctly at first, but there was genuine pleasure in her voice as she exclaimed, "I am so glad to see you again!" He had to collect his senses before he could answer with suitable composure.

"And you, Mrs. Crichton—how have you been?"

She did not reply till the servant had lighted the lamps and had left the room; then he saw that she looked worn and thin, and that her eyes seemed too large for her face.

"I? I have not been quite well; but I cannot go into that now. Another time."

Adair bowed. "And the children; am I too late to see them?"

"Oh, no ; they will be so glad."

She rang for the little ones, and they came eagerly, allowing of no talk save their own for half an hour, when Nurse marched them off to bed.

When they were left together, the silence remained unbroken for a minute ; then Adair raised his eyes to hers and said, " Well ? "

Her colour rose slowly as she replied, " Not very well ; though I have been trying to live up to the standard you set before me ; but I will tell you the result later. Come and see me soon—the day after to-morrow. Now tell me what you have been doing."

Adair complied, and they were talking merrily when Crichton came in.

He seemed brighter and more amiable than he was the day before. He talked freely enough to Adair, detailing how he managed to trace some underhand dealings of the secretary to one of his companies, and declaring his intention not to dabble in such concerns any more.

Adair observed that he did not take the slightest notice of his wife, who preserved her usual steady composure, though now and then he saw that she stole a watchful glance at her husband when he was looking away. There was a certain constraint over

the trio, though Adair did his best to talk on all sorts of abstract topics and to be as animated as possible. Crichton, however, always came back to the City and the Stock Exchange.

At last, to Adair's relief, it was time to say good-night. Yet he felt, as he always did when parting with her, a desperate reluctance to leave Gwendoline alone with her husband. Crichton had an ungovernable temper, and God only knew what tragedy might occur before Adair saw her again. Life was growing one long, feverish "waiting" to him.

Town was still empty—it was the first week of October—and Adair had therefore fewer calls to make or engagements to break his constant brooding; but "time and the hour run through the darkest day," and once more he was at luncheon with Mrs. Crichton and her children, who were charmed to see their favourite playmate.

"They have grown since I saw them last, especially George," said Adair, as they rose from table.

"Oh, George is considerably advanced," said his mother, stroking his head and pressing it against her. "He goes to a preparatory school now nearly all day."

"Yes," said George, proudly, "it is ever so much better to have boys to play with."

"I remember thinking the same thing when I was a youngster. What barbarians boys are!" said Adair, laughing.

"They cannot help it," returned Mrs. Crichton, thoughtfully. "It has always seemed to me that there is no real sympathy between men and women. Come, children, you must go out while the day is bright and warm ; you can leave Georgie at school."

"Don't let them come to the door with me, mother," urged Georgie ; "I can go quite well down the street alone."

"Very well," said his mother, smiling.

"Now tell me how it has been with you all these days," asked Adair, when they were safe in the comfortable morning-room.

He leaned his shoulder against the end of the mantelpiece and looked down at her as she sat by her work-table embroidering a frock for baby.

"I have nothing new to tell," she said, without looking up from her work. "Things go on in the old way. I did make the effort I promised. I asked Mr. Crichton to fix a certain allowance for my sister, and to pay it regularly. I asked it quietly and reasonably ; but, oh, Norman, he made an awful scene!—worse than any hitherto. I was

dreadfully frightened, but I kept a better front than I ever did before. Still, the strain since has been great. Of course he said a great deal that was fierce and cruel ; but the next day when he was less excited I said that if he would not agree to that I must get her what was necessary out of the house allowance. He was not quite so wild then, but he swore a good deal, and, with a degree of composure which looked like earnest, said he would immediately change his will and leave his managing clerk, Phillips—a man I particularly dislike—executor and guardian to the children, with a very small life-income to myself, as he would not leave his hard-earned money to be squandered on sickly beggars. Then my baby has been ill, and my poor Mary has had a terrible attack of pain. It is wonderfully good of you to come and see me ; for I always have a catalogue of woes to detail.”

She looked up at him with a slight smile, and, laying down her work, leaned back in her seat, dropping her right hand over the arm of the chair despondently.

“ All that you have to tell has absorbing interest for me,” said Adair. “ I shall go and see your sister when I leave you. This threat about the will

is serious. Now I remember, Mr. Crichton was engaged with his lawyer when I called on him the other day."

"I can do nothing," she returned; "and, oh, I am so dreadfully weary! There is no use in talking of my affairs. Tell me of your own. Have you made up your mind as to your future? When do you intend to go to sea?"

"I don't know. I cannot leave England at present."

"But you love your profession, Norman, and I don't think you would be happy as an idle gentleman."

"I do not think of happiness!" he exclaimed, beginning to pace to and fro restlessly; "but, Mrs. Crichton, I cannot—I cannot leave you unprotected, unaided, to the misery and danger of your life. I will not!"

"Norman," she returned, after a brief pause, for his voice as well as his words was a startling revelation to her, "this is more than I ought to expect—more than you ought to offer. You have done me the greatest service already. Even were you my brother you would not sacrifice your career for me."

"Look on me as a brother who is ready to do that—and more," he said, pausing opposite to her. "I will wait within reach until—until some deliver-



ance, some amelioration of your bitter lot, comes to you. I humbly, earnestly beg you to accept this service."

Mrs. Crichton leaned her elbow on the little table beside her, covered her face with her hand, and kept silence for a minute.

"No, Norman," she said, looking up to him with calm grave eyes and a white face, "this is more than you ought to do for me—more than, as a true friend, I ought to permit. Our lives must always be apart, and I could never in any way repay such devotion. I dare not accept it, Norman."

"Do you think I would ever ask anything in return?" he exclaimed, resuming his troubled walk. "Don't you see there is a certain selfishness in my wish to be at hand should you need me? Great heavens! how could I rest, how could I give my mind to anything, haunted as I should be night and day by the picture of you and those little ones at the mercy of such a—of Crichton. You don't know how the knowledge of what you endure has sunk into my heart and possessed my soul."

Then Mrs. Crichton spoke, earnestly, impressively, of the folly and imprudence of such a line of conduct; and, while he seemed to listen, Adair

collected his thoughts, and perceived the mistake he had made in showing his hand. He would oppose her no more openly, but he would act in accordance with his own inclinations.

"You are awfully severe," he said, at length, in a lighter tone than he had yet used. "I'll think of your good advice, and——" He broke off, and then resumed: "Even if I were to begin worrying for a ship to-morrow, don't suppose I should be appointed to one for months, however I might try. Anyhow, while I am ashore, for God's sake make use of me. Promise me this much."

"Yes, I do promise, if you promise to be sensible, to take up your life seriously, and not let any dreams of helping me—which you could only do in some masked way, such as I ought never to accept, and hope never again to seek—interfere with your plans."

"I will be guided by you. I will do *anything*, if you will only trust me!" he exclaimed, imploringly.

"Oh, Norman, you are kind and true. How can I reject the aid that seems sent to me by a merciful Providence?" cried the sorely tried woman, covering her face with her hands to hide the tears which would come.

Adair turned away and walked to the end of the room ; he dared not look at her.

In a few moments she regained self-control.

"You said you were going to see my sister," she began, not quite steadily.

"And you want me to go?" he said, turning quickly.

"Yes, Norman."

"Suppose you come with me?"

"No ; not to-day."

"All right ; I'll go. And—I may come and see you again in a day or two? Remember, I am going to put myself under your guidance and be sensible, selfish, practical—what you like."

"Very well, Norman." She held out her hand ; it was cold and tremulous. He pressed it close.

"Don't despair," he said, huskily. "If we don't know the evil, neither do we know the good, which awaits us. Put me out of your mind, except as a useful servant whom you can summon in time of need."

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## CHAPTER VI.

A COUPLE of days later a telegram was handed to Adair, as he sat at breakfast in the chambers where he had established himself, intending to make London his headquarters for some time to come.

Opening it, he read with great surprise that it was from his mother and dated from Paris ; while he had believed she was at Nice. "Meet us at Charing Cross this evening. Secure rooms at Grosvenor," ran the brief despatch.

"This is sudden," thought Adair. "What can have started them off? Effie can't be worse, or she could not travel—not so fast—and my mother is not whimsical. Well, I'll be glad to see them again. I wonder what they mean to do with themselves this winter."

Yet he was a little ashamed of not feeling more glad. His first vivid thought was, "How will their presence affect my friendship with Mrs. Crichton?" A little more reflection suggested that it might, on the whole, be favourable to more frequent meetings—meetings less dangerously delightful because shared by others, yet opportunities of being with *her*, the one "her" in the world then for him.

He ought to let Mrs. Crichton know that his mother and sister were coming, to explain that he would probably be occupied next day, when he had intended to call. All this could be said in a note, of course. Perhaps it would be better to write ;

but then, as he should lose his intended visit to-morrow, he had a right to discount it to-day. Besides——Well, anyhow, he would call, and say his say face to face.

First he would walk over to Victoria and secure rooms for his people, and go on to Sutherland Gardens after. "I am sure to find her at home early." But he was disappointed.

The civil smiling parlour-maid informed him that Mrs. Crichton had taken the baby, who had had a very bad night, to Dr. W——'s, naming a well-known doctor who made children his speciality, and she (the speaker) did not know when she would be back.

Adair was therefore reduced to write and resign himself to a prolonged absence of a few hours, which seemed an intolerable age to him.

It was a long, tiresome day, but it came to an end at last, and Adair stood waiting on the platform within a few minutes of the hour at which the Paris express was due.

It arrived with the usual punctuality, and Adair soon found himself in his sister's arms, while his mother contented herself with a hasty kiss and hand-pressure.

"I hope all's well with you?" he cried, heartily. "Your telegram gave me a start this morning, I can tell you. But I am delighted to see you. Anything wrong, Effie?" to his sister, who was and evidently had been weeping.

"Wrong? Ah, yes. But I will tell you when we are alone."

These words startled her brother considerably, for Effie was a quiet, practical, "douce-like" creature, who rarely showed much emotion, and whose delicate health made her an object of constant care to her mother. Mrs. Adair was a woman of shrewd sense and strong character, who, perhaps unconsciously, tyrannized over her submissive daughter.

"Eh, Norman, my dearie! it does me good to see you again. Oh, Effie has been just a new creature, with the change and the fine air, up to a week ago; and now she is as you see. But you shall hear all about it when we are alone."

"What mysteries are afoot?" asked Norman laughing. "Well, come along. Can your maid look after your baggage and see it through the custom-house?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure; she is as good as a courier."

"Here, then, get into this cab. I have ordered dinner for you, and your courier can follow."

"Well, it is nice to hear English spoken all round you, after listening to French and German and Italian for near two years!" exclaimed Mrs. Adair, half an hour later, when she and her daughter after a hasty toilette sat down to an appetizing little dinner, her brow clearing as she looked at her son. "I have just been wearying to see you and take counsel with you. Effie, dry your eyes, child, and eat a bit: you ought to be famished by now; and it's my belief that neither mind nor body works properly if you cannot eat; and you never wanted the use of your judgment more than at the present time."

"Take a little champagne, old girl," said Adair, kindly. "I don't like to see you in the down-below. You know if I can give you a helping hand I will. In spite of the tears, you are looking pounds better than when I left you at Florence this time last year."

"Thank you, Norman dear," murmured Effie, putting away her pocket-handkerchief and sipping her champagne, while her brother, not feeling much mental disturbance, continued his dinner with cheerful attention.

Mrs. Adair did most of the talking, and sprinkled

her talk with dim allusions to "Effie's trouble" and "Effie's improvement until she became first taken up with havers," etc. As soon as dinner was over, the object of these remarks expressed a wish to go to bed, as she could not sit up any longer, and, pressing her brother's hand as she left the room, whispered a request that he would stand by her.

"What is it all about, mother?" asked Norman, returning to the table and refilling his glass.

"It isn't well to speak of family matters in a public room. Come up to my chamber—it's like a drawing-room—and have a cigar, while I explain things a bit. I'm sure I'm sore in need of a word of counsel."

"By all means, mother. I'll just settle for dinner, and follow you in a minute or two."

"Well, my dear lad," began Mrs. Adair as soon as her son joined her, "we had a beautiful time at first, and I didn't know myself, with money enough for everything we wanted, and no need to be worrying over the pennies; while the colour was coming into Effie's pale cheeks, and light into her eyes, all thanks to you, my son."

Adair laughed and waved his hand deprecatingly.

"We made many nice and elegant friends, as I



have recounted to you in my weekly letters, which I cannot say you have replied to with the regularity I could have wished. But young men are heedless. Well, all was quiet and happy till last April. We had stayed on at St. Remo, and there our friends Mr. and Mrs. Hooper—very charming people, just given up to art and music and that sort of thing, having no bairns—introduced a very intelligent young man, one Mr. Hargrave, rather in delicate health, and looking the worse of wearing his hair long and having big black uncanny sort of eyes. They said he was a man of genius. Anyhow, he played the fiddle wonderfully ; but I found it rather heart-breaking to listen to him. He was only half English. His mother was Italian, a Countess something, I believe. He was very pleasant, and took no end of trouble to find us summer lodgings in the hills, at a lovely spot. I wrote to you about it, you'll remember. But I didn't bargain for his taking a room in the same ramshackle old inn, but he did, and used to sit upon a rock and fiddle away by the hour. Effie said it was divine ; I thought it was like a cat with a pain in its stomach. Then he began to teach Effie Italian ; and really she got on surprisingly well ; but one day, to my

disgust, I found him on his knees in the garden, kissing her hand, and she crying salt tears. I didn't show how angry I was : I spoke him fair : they are a wicked, revengeful set, those Italians : he was brought up in Romish errors, too, and could pay for a murder, and have it wiped out as easy as possible. I just asked what it all meant ; and he made a speech as long as my arm about his adoration and devotion to my poor bit girlie, and talked of the golden glory of her hair—meaning her red head—and she drinking it all in. I did think she was more wise-like. So I gave him a piece of my mind, and told him that the young lady had no fortune, but was dependent on her brother, who would likely marry and not want to be hampered with her. Then—my word ! but he threw his arms about, and swore, just awfully, that he only wanted the angel for herself alone, and none of our filthy lucre ; which was vera ” (with emphasis) “ uncivil : people are a good deal more filthy without it. So then my troubles began ; and a weary time I had. At first your poor sister heard reason a bit, and I took her on to Switzerland and down to the Italian lakes, and wherever we went my gentleman turned up, with his long

hair and his fiddle. So I came on to Paris, thinking that would be more than he could manage ; but no ! the day before yesterday I had had a hard morning's shopping at the Louvre, and when I came into our little sitting-room at the *pension* whom should I find but Mr. Hargrave, his tongue going like the clapper of a mill, and that silly bairnie Effie gazing at him, her two eyes just shining as if the sun was behind them. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak, she cries, ' Oh, mother dear, don't be angry, but I have promised to be his wife ! ' ' That you'll never be,' said I, very resolute. ' You shall come away to your brother ; maybe you'll hear reason from him.' And here we are."

" It's all a confounded nuisance," said Norman, " but I am sorry for Effie. I don't fancy she has had much experience in love-affairs. And if she believes in the fellow, why, you and I will seem hard-hearted brutes to her. What do you want me to do ? "

" Why, as her natural guardian, write to this man and forbid him the house. Tell him——"

" But don't you think it would be fairer to hear what he and Effie have to say for themselves first ? "

"Oh, if you are going to play fast and loose in that fashion my poor girl will be coaxed away, and there will be no end of troubles. You surely wouldn't like your sister to be joined to a Papist, and a Papist not worth a bawbee into the bargain?"

"Ay, there's the rub, really," he returned, laughing. "A Papist with property might be worth bringing into the true fold."

"Well, Norman, I thought you had more respect for your mother than to use such expressions."

"A thousand apologies! I know you are a sincere, good woman; but circumstances are omnipotent. Believe me, I am as averse as you can be to a half-Italian, long-haired, fiddling brother-in-law, but I must hear Effie before I can offer advice or take any line of conduct. I am sorry for her. I wish it had been some honest Britisher. It's a hard trial when a love-affair goes wrong—especially to a woman."

"Goodness' sake, Norman, my man, don't talk like that: it seems as if you too were making a fool of yourself about some love-nonsense."

"Of course I am, mother. I should feel quite uncomfortable and out of the common if I were not in love with some one. You know that," said

Adair, laughing. "But I am not going to present you with a daughter-in-law just yet."

"Ah, my dear son, may you be guided in your choice, and not carried away by mere outward seeming!"

"Amen, mother. Now you look weary and sleepy; I'll leave you; but to-morrow I'll come over early and have a talk with Effie; then we'll decide what's best to be done. And, remember, I am really on your side; only we mustn't be harsh."

A note awaited Adair when he reached his rooms:

"My sincerest congratulations, dear Norman," it said. "It will be so delightful for you to have your mother and sister with you. Of course you will be quite taken up with them. Let me know where they are to be found. If agreeable to your mother, I should like to call on her. I fancy that in the old days I was not exactly first favourite with her. Now I want to make her like me. Send me a few hints. Baby is much better—at least the doctor says so—but the poor little darling is still restless and suffering. Come and see him when you can; for the present, of course, you belong to your

mother. I wonder if Effie remembers me—that is, her old love for me?

“Yours very truly,

“GWENDOLINE C.”

Adair read this over slowly more than once. How like her writing was to herself—clear, firm, yet graceful! Everything about her was intensely womanly. How full and soft the tones of her voice were! He could hear them speaking the words which his eyes were perusing. It would be delightful if friendship were to spring up between Gwen and his womankind. What a help, what a support, his mother might be to Mrs. Crichton if she proved sympathetic! It was a tremendous “if,” however. Some unaccountable prescience seemed to tell Adair that this ardent hope would never be fulfilled. His feeling for all that in any way touched the queen of his soul was too deep, too keen, not to bestow a measure of second-sight as regarded what concerned her.

He wrote a few lines thanking Gwendoline for her note and gratefully accepting her offer of a visit to his mother.

The next morning was occupied by a long and

tearful interview with his sister, whose version of the trouble was very different from the one which he had heard from his mother.

Poor Effie was deeply touched by her brother's tenderness and consideration, though she perceived that he was strongly averse to such an impecunious marriage.

It was finally agreed that her lover should write his proposal and a statement of his financial condition and prospects, and Adair promised to take as favourable a view of matters as common sense would permit. The romantic young lassie was greatly cheered, and ran blithely to her room to indite a small volume to her *fiancé*.

Adair was very attentive to his mother during the first days of her stay, escorting her to her solicitor's and stockbroker's offices, and taking her to the few "sights" she wished to see.

The evening but one after their arrival in London Mrs. Adair and Effie dined with Norman at his chambers, a festivity which greatly pleased and excited the former. To be a guest in her son's abode greatly amused the shrewd Scotchwoman.

"Eh!" she exclaimed, "you have a fine set-out

here, and I'm thinking *your* housekeeping would keep a family."

"Oh, I am a strict economist, I assure you. I rarely dine at home."

"Then your cook seems well experienced, for all that."

"Oh, so she or he is," said Adair, smiling, the banquet, of course, having been sent in from a restaurant.

"Oh, Norman," exclaimed Effie, "we had a visit from Mrs. Crichton to-day. How handsome and sweet she is! I should never have known her. She used not to be such an elegant creature, as well as I remember."

"Fine feathers make fine birds," remarked her mother. "Gwendoline Hill seems to have done well for herself in the way of marriage. She is a wee airified; not but that she is very civil and soft-spoken."

"Oh, she is a capital woman, quite devoted to her home and the children and all that. The youngsters are such jolly little things, especially the girl, who has lovely eyes just like her mother's—a thorough little flirt—has made up her mind to marry me."

"H'm!" murmured Mrs. Adair, helping herself



to a little more mayonnaise. "I hope she is kept in her place. The way people spoil their bairns nowadays is just fearful."

"Oh, these little creatures are patterns of discipline, obedience, and all the rest of it," cried Adair.

"I am glad to hear it. It seems to me you are very intimate with our old acquaintance. I wonder you did not speak more of her in your letters."

"But I did. I told you of our meeting at a dinner-party, and of staying with them in the country, and——"

"I know; but you did not say that you were just like a brother in the house."

"Yes, of course. It was very nice to have Effie's place supplied when she was galivanting about with fascinating musicians," returned Adair, lightly. He perceived that for some inscrutable reason his mother had not taken to Mrs. Crichton, and therefore decided to say as little as possible on the subject.

"I must say she is very polite. She has invited us to dinner on Tuesday first, as she wishes to introduce her husband to me. I'm glad to hear she manages her children well, for I remember she was a bit flighty and too ready with her tongue long

ago. She talks fast even now. She said you were quite a comfort to her—which was not a wise-like speech for a young married woman.”

“Not so very young, mother,” remarked Effie.  
“She is as old as Norman.”

“She is nearly two years younger,” returned her brother.

“And that’s old enough for discretion,” said Mrs. Adair, gravely.

Her son changed the subject by proposing a visit to the theatre on the following night, and Mrs. Crichton was not again mentioned.

As he anticipated, an invitation to dinner at Sutherland Gardens reached Adair that evening. A line at the end said, “If you are free, come to luncheon to-morrow”—on reading which he breathed a prayer that the letter from Hargrave which Effie so eagerly expected would not arrive next morning and compel him to pass it with his sister.

His wish was fulfilled, and one o’clock found him in the presence he longed for.

“It is five days since we have seen you, Norman,” exclaimed Mrs. Crichton, greeting him with frank pleasure when he entered : she was busy with some

flowers just arrived from the country. "I cannot shake hands with you : my fingers are wet. I want to put all these into water as soon as possible."

How sweet and home-like the room was ! how well and bright she looked ! Yes, she had bloomed into greater beauty since the day he had been able to set her free—free from the haunting terror which was undermining her life, and which she had borne so marvellously. Ah, what a blessed thing money and the power it gave was, sometimes !

"This box from our summer quarters is a treasure-trove of beauty. If I were rich I should spend a great deal on flowers ; but no flowers are so enchanting as the flowers you rear yourself. I should deeply enjoy a garden. It is such a healthy joy for children, too," standing back a little to contemplate a large china bowl she had just filled, and drying her hands on a duster.

"I believe that you view everything in heaven and earth only as it affects the children !" exclaimed Adair, with an unconscious feeling of jealousy towards those young people.

She laughed. "I am afraid that is exactly what I do not do, Norman. When I sit over my work,

I do not think of them as much perhaps as a mother ought."

"Of whom do you think, then?" he asked, drawing a chair to the table on which the flowers lay, that he might watch her at his ease. "Mr. Crichton?"

"Oh, yes, I used to think of him continually; but you delivered me from that, dear Norman. I wonder if you know the enormous deliverance you wrought for me?"

Adair did not answer immediately: he was gazing at her long white fingers, which were deftly piling up the débris of stalks and leaves previous to ringing for their removal.

"Then you don't think so much of Crichton now?" he said, slowly.

"No. You see, I have not so much reason to fear him; but I pity him often. He is not happy, though he is so determined to have everything he likes."

"H'm! pity is akin to love."

"I hope so," she returned, with a sigh.

"You forget all this time," said Adair, "that you haven't shaken hands with me."

"Ah, yes," giving him her hand. He held it firmly.

"Do you know I am a bit of a chiromancer? Let me tell your fortune. I learned the art from an old witch of Thessaly at Port Said."

"Ah, yes, tell me. I am very curious about the future."

"Let me see," bending her hand back and pretending to read the pink palm. "Ah, the line of life has been almost severed by some great blow or trial; but it is past—though there are trials to come. You have a dangerous enemy, whom you cannot baffle unassisted: so a good fairy god-mother has sent you a devoted friend, to whom you must turn in every moment of difficulty."

"Norman, you are a transparent impostor!" she exclaimed, laughing, yet colouring, and trying to draw her hand away.

"No, no! I haven't told you half. A little later," he went on, holding her hand in a grasp she could not loosen, "you will be called on to make an important decision, on which your future will depend."

"And how shall I decide?" she asked, trying to laugh the seriousness of his manner away.

"Well and wisely," said Adair, suddenly releasing her hand, "though with some tears of compassion for another's suffering."

"Really, Norman, these mystic pretensions do not suit you at all," cried Mrs. Crichton, as the servant entered to clear away the remains of the flowers. "You have far too honest a face to put on such airs successfully."

Here the two elder children came running in to hug and kiss their favourite playfellow, and then they went to luncheon.

It was always a pleasant, cheery meal, though the children needed attention and repression ; but there was something so confidential and familiar about the informal meeting as to make Adair feel that he was indeed one with the woman he loved so well and her children.

It was all very wrong and wicked, but that was his fault, his sin only. He was ready to pay the price ; he was strong enough never to offend Gwendoline, and for the rest he could suffer alone.

"I had quite a long chat with your mother, Norman," said Mrs. Crichton, when the children were carried off for their afternoon walk and their mother with her guest had returned to her morning room. "She is a very interesting person. How it carried me back to old times to hear her

“speak ! I remember her voice so well. She is much more Scotch than you are, Norman.”

“You see, I was brought up almost altogether in England.”

“Yes. You are younger than your sister, are you not ?”

“I am.”

“She looks ill, as if she had been crying bitterly.”

“I am afraid she is rather miserable, poor girl,” returned Adair ; and he proceeded to give Mrs. Crichton the Hargrave history : it had become quite natural for him to tell her everything.

Mrs. Crichton looked very grave. “It does not sound a promising affair, Norman. I prefer foreigners who are purely foreign to these Continentalized Englishmen ; and then, unless a musician is a genius, and an acknowledged genius, it is quite an inferior position. You must persuade her to give it up.”

“I suppose so,” said Adair. “But it is rather hard. I don’t fancy she has ever had the ghost of a lover before. <sup>1</sup>Life without love is very dreary.”

“Oh, some kind of love one must have, but I am not sure that life is not more truly and peacefully happy without the love of lovers.”

"That sometimes brings plenty of pain, I dare say ; but it is worth all it costs. At least I fancy so," he added, checking himself.

Mrs. Crichton did not look up from her needle-work. She sighed softly, and said, in a reflective tone, "How awfully anxious I shall be when the time comes for my precious Winnie to be sought in marriage !" There was a pause ; then she startled Adair by saying, as if to herself, "I should like her to marry some one like you, Norman : you seem to me so good and true."

"Thank you ; you pay me the highest compliment possible," replied Adair, his brown cheek flushing a deep red. "Shall I wait for your dainty daughter ?"

"Oh, no," she returned. "I hope you will be happily settled with a sweet sympathetic companion long before poor Winnie is called upon to face the dangers and difficulties of that most momentous choice, the choice of a husband. What a long, long way to look forward to ! What may not happen before !"

"I never look far ahead : the present is all-sufficient for me," said Adair, in a low tone, and keeping his eyes on the carpet.



"Ah, Norman, your present is very good, I am glad to think, but you must think of your future—your career, I mean."

"Yes, I know you want to send me off to sea ; but I am not going yet, even to please *you*."

"No doubt you will do as you choose. But are you coming to dinner on Tuesday?"

"Most certainly."

"Then let us go round and see my sister."

"By all means."

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## CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning's post brought bitter mortification and floods of tears to poor Effie Adair.

Her lover sent a shuffling, temporizing letter to Norman, in which, with many professions of devotion and self-sacrifice, he withdrew his petition for the hand of Mr. Adair's adorable sister. He could not ask her to share his poor lot or to resign the luxuries of her exalted position ; but the memory of the brief happiness enjoyed in her society would raise him to a nobler stand-point and cast a halo over his past, etc., etc., etc.

Adair read very clearly between the lines, that

the highly gifted Hargrave understood from his letter that he had a man of resolution and common sense to deal with, and, moreover, that the fair Effie was entirely dependent on her brother—a fact he probably did not believe on her mother's statement.

Of course no reasoning would induce Effie to accept this explanation. No, her beloved Ulrico was the noblest, the most disinterested of men, actuated only by the purest and highest affection for herself. He had no doubt been addressed in a hard and cruel manner by her hard and prejudiced brother, and feared to risk the anger of her family by calling on the woman he loved.

Norman at last grew tired of her folly. "Well, Effie," he said, "have it your own way. You will come round to my opinion yet. Anyway, the thing is at an end, for the fellow gives you up. I wish you would put him out of your head. I promise you that the first straight-going British gentleman you accept, I'll give you a decent 'tocher'; but I hate half-breeds." With this narrow-minded expression of opinion Adair left the room and bent his way to the City, as he took care to call on Crichton occasionally to ask his

advice about investments (which he did not always follow) and to inquire into the proceedings of the "Sea-Side Villa Company." It cost him a good bit of self-control to cultivate Crichton even in a small degree ; but it was well worth his while to exert it, for Crichton was jealous in a peculiar fashion. To suspect his wife of ever giving a thought to any one save himself never entered his head, nor that any man would admire her save in the most abstract manner ; but that any one, male or female, should prefer her society, her conversation, her opinions, to his, was an astounding and unpardonable error. It was, then, very essential to keep well with the master of No. 19, Sutherland Gardens, who was master of so much into the bargain.

Adair was always welcome to Crichton, who honestly loved the rich and inexperienced. He liked to pass as a man of vast knowledge in money and other matters, and, firmly believing in himself, succeeded in creating faith in others. But Adair had something of Scotch shrewdness as regarded "siller," and made much show about a small matter of trust ; nevertheless it answered the purpose of the moment.

The ensuing few days were by no means pleasant ones to Mrs. Adair and her daughter. Norman wisely kept out of the way, with the horror of disagreeable scenes peculiar to his sex. There was one matter, however, concerning which he was anxious to jog his mother's memory. It would, he thought, gratify Mrs. Crichton if she called on her sister : so he opened the subject one morning when he had looked in on her soon after breakfast.

"Oh, by the way, have you called on Miss Hill?"

"What! Mrs. Crichton's sister?"

"Yes."

"Well, no; I didn't think of it. I thought we might meet her at Sutherland Gardens to-morrow."

"My dear mother! why, she has not been across her threshold for years."

"Eh! is she that bad? Gwendoline just shook her head about her, and said she was no better; but I did not make out she was quite a cripple, What is it?"

"Acute rheumatism, I believe."

"It's a severe discipline—a sair dispensation but we can't know what is good for us."

"We are generally at odds in opinion on that

subject with the higher powers, I must say," said Adair, laughing.

"Don't be irreverent, my son. Well, I have a brougham for the afternoon, and I'll just go over and see Mary Hill: maybe, as it's a melancholy kind of visit, it may suit Effie. Eh, Norman, I have had a weary time! she is just off her head about that fiddler man."

"Yes, it's hard lines for her. Couldn't you go somewhere, where there's a preserve of curates? Has she any tendency to go to confession? She might screw some comfort, and maybe a fresh lover, out of that."

"I am not pleased to hear you jeer in that way. God forbid that a child of mine should be given to those Romish practices! I wish, Norman, you would cultivate a soberer spirit."

"All right, mother: I'll behave better in future. Where is Effie?"

"Oh, in her room, writing poetry into a book."

"What! have her troubles turned her poetical?"

"Hoot toot! no. She is writing it out of one book into another."

"Why the deuce doesn't she buy the poems she likes and keep the lot of them?"

"It's better as it is: it's more of a ploy. I am glad to say she is a trifle brighter, though, ever since she called on Mrs. Crichton. I was too busy, and I didn't like her visit to be left unreturned, so I just sent Effie in a cab to Sutherland Gardens. She said Mrs. Crichton was a sweet, sympathetic woman when she came back."

"Ah, I dare say she gave her some good advice, if Effie confided in her at all. Mrs. Crichton is a very sensible woman."

"More likely she talked a lot of sentimental rubbish. Good advice is never considered sympathetic."

"Perhaps you are right. Good morning, mother. Don't forget to call on Mary Hill."

It had been a busy day, the Tuesday on which Mrs. Adair and her son and daughter were to dine at Sutherland Gardens. Mrs. Adair had almost decided on going to Torquay for the winter, and found that she had as much shopping to do as if her destination had been a desolate island where the resources of civilization were unknown. She was, therefore, barely punctual, and found her son already arrived.

Mrs. Adair's general aspect conveyed an idea of importance ; she was impressive, too, in her manner of speech, and was, moreover, well and richly dressed. In fact, she was the style of guest Mr. Crichton delighted to honour, and he made himself agreeable accordingly.

Miss Adair was rather cool and stiff to her brother, but looked better and brighter ; while he greeted her with kindly warmth.

"It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to my house, Mrs. Adair," said Mr. Crichton, in his best manner, "both as an old friend of my wife's and as the mother of my young friend here, whom we find a great acquisition, I assure you. You see the children quite take possession of him," waving his hand towards Norman, on whose knee Winnie was contentedly perched.

"And sweet wee bairns they are," ejaculated his guest.

"Come and speak to the lady, Winnie," said her father.

Winnie looked with some awe at Mrs. Adair, and hesitated.

"Do you hear me ?" he exclaimed, sternly.

Winnie slipped from Norman's encircling arm

and came up with outstretched hand, her eyes fixed on Crichton.

"And what's your name, my lammie?" asked Mrs. Adair, smiling on her.

"Winnie," said the child, and turned away.

"Stop!" cried her father. "Don't run off, like a little savage, the moment you have spoken. I'm afraid, Mrs. Adair, there is very little discipline in my house. Mrs. Crichton is too soft-hearted with her children—lets them do as they like."

"You are soft-hearted yourself, George," said his wife, pleasantly.

"Oh, I'm fond enough of them, but I don't spoil them : there's the difference. Here, Georgie."

The boy was absorbed in a picture-book at the other end of the room, and did not hear. Crichton frowned, and repeated his call, but without raising his voice. Still no answer. A third time he called, now in stentorian tones. The boy started, and came quickly.

"Why did you not come at once, sir?"

"Did you call before?" returned Georgie.

"That's rather a clever dodge," said his father, laughing harshly, "but it won't do, my boy. Be off to your bed, for disobedience and deceit!"



"But, papa, I did *not* hear ; indeed I did not."

"I'll be bound you'll hear another time. Off with you !"

"I am sure he did not hear," put in Mrs. Crichton, who had flushed up and then turned very white.

"Oh, I'll cure his deafness," cried his father. "Go, sir !"

The child's eyes filled with tears. His mother went over to him, and said, gently, "You must obey, dear. I will explain to father."

She went with him to the door, kissed him gently, and closed it behind him.

"I am sure you managed your children well, Mrs. Adair, or you would not have sent out so good a specimen as our friend Norman here."

Adair had kept profoundly still, but his eyes had sought Mrs. Crichton's, and they exchanged a glance of profound sympathy.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "there isn't a finer, better little chap anywhere than your boy, Crichton !"

"Maybe so ; but——"

"Dinner is on the table," said the parlour-maid ; and the brief but unpleasant episode was over.

Possibly Crichton feared he might have made a bad impression ; but at dinner he was especially

amiable and did the host with his most gracious air of *bonhomie*. Mrs. Adair was a somewhat profuse talker in a slow and pertinacious fashion, and her host listened as if to dropping pearls of wit and wisdom ; he was complimentary to Effie and cordial to Norman ; but he took little or no notice of his wife, who was rather silent and pre-occupied ; her heart was with her boy, whom she pictured sobbing in his bed, his little heart aching and burning with a sense of wrong and injustice.

By a gallant effort Adair forced himself to take part in the conversation and cover the unusual quiet of his hostess.

"I was very pleased to see your sister Mary yesterday," said Mrs. Adair. "She has changed a good bit ; but, as I was saying to her, most things are mixed with mercy, and at least she seems to have every needful comfort, which is something to be thankful for."

"I am so much obliged to you for calling on her. I have not seen her since, but I am sure your visit was a great pleasure to her."

"Not seen her for twenty-four hours !" exclaimed Crichton. "Well, that is a wonder. I assure you, Mrs. Adair, I don't fancy if the house was on fire.

or the children at the last gasp, my wife would omit her diurnal visit to her invalid sister."

"Mr. Crichton does not often indulge in such imaginative flights. As I am a large percentage of the mercy with which her lot is mixed, I shall try to see my sister as regularly as I can," said Mrs. Crichton, gently.

"I am sure it must be very nice to have a sister," cried Effie: "another girl would feel for you so much more than a brother. Men are hard."

"If you ask me, Miss Adair, I should say all men, even a brother, would be soft to a young lady like you," said Crichton, gallantly.

"Ah, Mr. Crichton, you little know!" returned Effie, shaking her head dolefully.

"Ah, Miss Adair, do they treat you badly? If so, come and tell your troubles to me. Your brother will show you the way to my office, and I'll see what can be done for you."

"Eh! and what will Mrs. Crichton say?" asked the young lady, coquettishly.

"Oh, she isn't jealous; nor, for that matter, am I. I have no reason. If I had, I'd make it pretty hot all round, I can tell you."

"Dear me, Mr. Crichton! I should be quite afraid of you."

"No, no; none need fear me, if they are honest and above-board; but I never would forgive deceit." And, to Adair's indignation, he glanced at his wife.

"Deceit is just intolerable, especially to the Scotch," observed Mrs. Adair, solemnly.

"Yes," rejoined her son; "at least they have a great objection to be deceived. Whether they have an equally strong objection to deceive is another question."

"Eh, Norman, you should not speak against your own: it's not patriotic."

"I am not speaking against the Scotch. My belief is that if we could get at the real truth respecting morals (and I suppose truth is included in morals) among all nations, there would not be a pin to choose between them."

"But there can be no doubt, my dearie, that religious truth was specially given to the Northern Protestants—a precious gift."

"A very unfair one!" exclaimed Adair, smiling. "Why should the Northerners be so highly favoured?"

"Take another glass of claret, Mrs. Adair," said the host.

"No, I am much obliged to you. I cannot say I like sacred topics discussed at a dinner-table."

"Shall we go upstairs?" said Mrs. Crichton.

The ladies were soon followed by Adair and his host. Then Effie, on being pressed, sang some Scotch ballads in a high, shrill voice, and Mr. Crichton applauded. He said he liked songs with some spirit in them—not things that would make you cry your eyes out.

Mrs. Adair, who was sitting by the fire, now begged Mrs. Crichton to favour them. She good-humouredly assented, choosing a German air with English words. She sang with simple pathos, and her voice was sweet and true, but somewhat sad.

"Thank you," said Adair, in a low tone, when she returned to her place.

"There's a lively tune for you!" said Crichton, contemptuously.

"Indeed it's a trifle sad," observed Mrs. Adair.

"But infinitely sweet," added her son.

"It's growing late," continued Mrs. Adair. "I think we had better be going homewards. I'll trouble your people to call a cab."

"What's your hurry, Mrs. Adair?" asked Crichton. "You must take a little whiskey and

soda before you go. I can promise you the whiskey is real Scotch."

"No, thank you ; it is just the only Scotch thing I cannot abide."

"When do you go to Torquay?" asked Mrs. Crichton.

"I'm not quite sure. I want to be in time to secure good rooms ; and Effie has started coughing again."

"Oh, it isn't much, mother."

In a few minutes the cab was announced and adieux were exchanged.

"It has given me great pleasure to make your acquaintance," said Mr. Crichton, offering his arm to Mrs. Adair. "I hope to see you again when you pass through town."

"Good-night, dear Mrs. Crichton," whispered Effie. "You don't know how much good you did me by your suggestion that *he* may just be waiting till he is in a better position ; so I'll have faith and patience."

"I must see them to their hotel, I suppose," said Adair, in a discontented tone.

"Yes, of course you must ; and please go, Norman. I am going to run away to my poor

little Georgie ; his heart must be nearly broken." Her voice was broken by a half-suppressed sob.

"When can I come again?" murmured Adair, catching her hand in both his own.

"Oh, not for a day or two ; not till your mother has left town. I am going to be busy."

"Very well. On Friday at tea-time?"

"Yes, that will do. Go, dear Norman ; they are waiting for you."

She turned and ran swiftly upstairs. The effect of this evening was irritating to Adair. He was almost dismayed at the height to which his dislike, nay, hatred, of Crichton had risen. The dominance of such a passion was sure to darken his judgment and weaken his power of befriending Gwendoline. He must fight against its growth. The man was growing more and more odious. Was his selfish greed undermining or unsettling his mental balance? If so, the consequences to wife and children were incalculable, and the necessity for his presence in England was stronger than ever. How would it all end? Well, all he could do was to live from day to day and meet emergencies as they arose.

## CHAPTER VIII.

HER strong maternal feeling and keen—though narrow—perception gave a curious instinctive, penetrating power to Mrs. Adair, though she could not give a reason, even to herself, for the sort of uneasiness which Norman's familiarity with his former playfellow caused her. "He couldn't be fonder of his ain bairns than he seems to be of Mrs. Crichton's—now that's not natural—and she has a way of turning to him on all occasions—that I don't like. She always was a fanciful, self-willed girl—and it's not like Norman to be ready to stay on and on in London. He's a good laddie—but the best of them are but men—and very weak! I wish he were married to a sensible, thoughtful leddy—who is not so full of poetry, books, and new-fangled notions as Gwen Crichton. Her husband's a fine, prosperous man—but, my word!—if he grew jealous!—my boy's life would not be safe."

So mused Mrs. Adair as she sat with the *Times* in her hand waiting for her son, the morning after their dinner at the Crichtons'. She had expected him at an earlier hour when, with his assistance,



she intended to make all her arrangements for their journey to Torquay.

"He was generally fairly punctual. What could have kept him? Some errand for Mrs. Crichton? No! Surely his mother would come before all other women, save indeed a wife—and even a wife——"

Here the door opened and a waiter brought her a card, on which she read the name of "Major-General Ogilvie."

"Eh!" she exclaimed. "Is the gentleman there? Then show him in," and she rose, murmuring to herself: "It's just providential," as a short, stout, square man, with grey mutton-chop whiskers and a weather-beaten, strong, rugged face, came briskly into the room.

"Weel, General, I *am* glad to see you. I had no notion you were in town—how did you find me?"

"Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure, Mrs. Adair! Jessie and I had run up to town partly on business, partly on pleasure; and I came here to call on Mackie. (He was our doctor when I commanded the old 103rd.) He was not in; and looking over the list of guests staying in the hotel, I found your names—so came to look you up."

"Ah!—and I'm delighted to hear your

daughter's with you ! My Effie—who is far from strong—will be pleased to have a crack with her. My boy is here too ! You'll mind Norman, though you haven't seen him for so many years."

"Yes, that I do !—a fine young fellow. I was rejoiced to hear the good news of his succession to old Ferguson's property."

And the two old acquaintances settled down to a most enlivening gossip—which diverted Mrs. Adair's mind from the fact that her son was nearly an hour behind time.

"But you're never going to run away on Thursday ?" exclaimed General Ogilvie, when they had amply discussed people and things ; "we think of remaining about three weeks longer, and we may do some sight-seeing and theatres together."

"I'm sure I feel well disposed to stay," returned Mrs. Adair. "But it's ill living in an hotel !—it's just like pouring water through a sieve—paying things at the prices they charge !"

"I believe you," with warm sympathy.

"It's what I couldn't and wouldn't undertake. Nor would Jessie hear of it either—(she's an uncommon prudent, far-seeing lassie). No, no ; we just took two or three rooms with a douce old

bodie, away near Regent's Park—where we pay thirty shillings a week rent ; two-and-sixpence, use of kitchen-fire ; sixpence a scuttle for coals, in sitting-room. I made her lump it all for thirty-six shillings a week — not bad, eh ? Then Jessie markets—it amuses her—for she's a born housewife——”

“ Ah ! and a treasure she'll be to some lucky man one of these days. You'll be loth to let her go. But it's the way of the world, general.”

“ You may say that, Mrs. Adair ! A better girl never stepped. Yet, to see her weel settled, would be a satisfaction. With a good man and a gentleman who had enough of his own to keep him from running after her ‘ Tocher ’—and that's not so easy to find—you know, between you and me—her uncle Bailie Mackintosh—(a dour old batchelor—who never had a civil word for man or beast) left all he had to her—and I—I have saved a trifle ; so the girlie will not go to her husband empty-handed——”

“ She's just a ‘ fortune in herself,’ General.”

“ You're too partial, Mrs. Adair—but don't you think if we found you a nice apartment close by ours—we are in Upper Park Terrace, N.W. I'll

write it on my card—you might stay on a few weeks? The young leddies would enjoy going about together; and you and I and Dr. Mackie might have a hand o' whist of an evening."

"I'd like it well, but I am expecting my son every minute, and I'd like to know whether he has written to Torquay about rooms we had heard of, so——"

"Mr. Adair," said a waiter, throwing open the door.

"You are just in the nick of time, my dear laddie," cried his mother. "Here's our friend General Ogilvie. You'll mind the General, Norman?"

"Yes." Norman did, but with less pleasurable associations than his mother. He was frankly courteous to the old soldier who greeted him with effusion, and then in a kind of duet with Mrs. Adair informed him of the project suggested by General Ogilvie, as to Mrs. Adair's prolonged stay in town. Norman made no objection, if his mother did not think it essential for Effie to go to the South Coast, why not stay in town? His mother had better consult Effie. How was she, by-the-way, not downstairs yet?"

"She was feverish and restless all night, so I made her bide a bit in her bed, but I'll go and see if she is ready."

"Now hear my proposition," said the general jovially; "come all of you to luncheon at my diggings. Jessie will be charmed—charmed, by Jove, to see you, and then Mrs. Adair can look at some rooms near us—I noticed some cards up as I came along this morning—and settle on an apartment, move in to-morrow, dine with us and arrange our plans for the next week or two."

"Really, General Ogilvie, you are too good!" exclaimed Adair.

"You are just the same hospitable, friendly soul as ever," cried his mother.

"Then I'll go back at once and tell my lassie you are coming, so *au revoir*. You drive straight on up Baker Street, third turn on your left after you pass the Park gates." He waved his hand and departed, on hospitable thoughts intent.

"This is a rapid act," exclaimed Norman, laughing as he threw himself into an arm chair. "How did old Ogilvie find you out, mother?"

Mrs. Adair explained, adding: "He is just a kind, good friend, and his daughter is with him; she'll be a nice companion for my Effie, and cheer her up, young people need young people. You'll mind Jessie Ogilvie, Norman?"

"I think I do, a tall, big-boned girl, with dull, carrotty hair, and freckles, was at school with Effie."

"Yes, that's the lassie, but she's wonderfully improved, she has grown fine and bonnie."

"Well, mother, do as you like. It may be brighter for Effie to have a girl companion anyhow."

"But my patience, Norman! I have clean forgotten, Effie was to have gone with Mrs. Crichton to see the Mint and now——"

"You needn't trouble about that. I have just come from Sutherland Gardens. I had a note early this morning from Gwen—I mean Mrs Crichton—to tell me that Georgie was very unwell, and she feared it might be something infectious. Of course, I went up there to see, and have come straight here. The doctor fears scarlatina, so——"

"Why, Norman, what induced you to enter the house? You may bring infection to Effie, you may take it yourself, or—it's just raving madness to mix yourself up with other folks' bairns, aye, or with other men's wives; you find a nice, foreseeing wife for your ain self."

"Other men's wives!" repeated Adair with rather a boisterous laugh. "Who has been slandering me to you, mother? I am a perfect saint!"

"Maybe, and maybe not, but I do believe you are a straight-walking young man, and mind you keep straight. Now I'll away to Effie."

Left alone, Adair's brow clouded over and a dark look gathered in his eyes. "What could she mean? Had she any meaning? What infernal fad had she taken up? Gwen had not made a favourable impression on his mother, who might have been a most useful friend to her. She sorely needs a woman friend! I am infinitely cautious. What is it that informs my mother? Oh! I exaggerate symptoms, it is all such a matter of life and death to me! I must be bold and cautious. If that brute Crichton had the faintest idea—not of a lover, that he would never entertain—but of a friend to his wife apart from himself, he would be a dangerous animal. I must throw dust in the mother's eyes, and humour her. I cannot—I will not leave Gwen helpless and friendless. I can do much for her so long as neither her own or other people's suspicions are aroused. It is an awfully difficult game to play, but I'll play it. How white and anxious she looked just now, and evidently that tyrant of hers blamed her for not preventing the inevitable! His love for his children is a source of torment to their mother,

and she is young. How will she live through the years to come? How shall I? Why does death spare Crichton, and take many a better fellow?" He paced slowly to and fro, recalling Gwendoline's looks and tones, the gentle dignity of her bearing, the strength of her quiet endurance, the rich tender womanliness of her nature, till his heart ached, his pulses throbbed, and he dared not look ahead. It was a bad quarter of an hour, and he was relieved when Effie, followed by her mother, came into the room. The former, though still pale and pasty, looked brighter than he had yet seen her.

"Good morrow to you, Norman! Isn't it nice to think the Ogilvies are here? I haven't seen them since we met in Florence quite a year ago. Jessie is such a gay lassie. I'd like well to stay on a bit beside them."

"If you and the mother like it, there is no reason why you should not stay."

"I fancy mother would like it—she is just awful fond of Jessie! We are going up to Brandon's about my new hat. We have just time to choose one before lunch. You'll be sure to come, Norman? Half-past one sharp, the General is very punctual."

"Yes, I'll be there, give me the card. Have you



noted the address? I'd like to see what sort of rooms you take. Don't make yourselves uncomfortable, you know old Ogilvie is a bit of a screw."

"He is a prudent, thoughtful man, as his daughter will find one of these days."

"Well, you had better be off, I have two or three places to call at, but I have *not* to try on a new hat, so I'll be at Park Terrace nearly as soon as yourselves."

"But, Norman," resumed his sister, "I am vexed to hear that sweet wee boy of Mrs. Crichton's is taken bad. It's a nasty disorder, yon scarlatina, it may turn to the fever, and Mrs. Crichton may take it herself. It's worse for grown people than bairns, but——"

"By Jove, Effie, you are a regular croaker! Why should Mrs. Crichton take any thing?—she has splendid health."

"We had need put on our outdoor wraps if we are to be at General Ogilvie's by one-thirty," put in Mrs. Adair.

"It is damp and raw," said Norman, "better have a closed carriage to take you and fetch you back."

"You're a thoughtful brother, Norman," said Effie gratefully. "My dear love to Mrs. Crichton

if you see her, and say how grieved I am that she has this trouble."

"What for should he see her?" exclaimed her mother impatiently. "She'll have enough to do tending her sick bairn. She'll not want to laugh and talk about books and plays when her boy is in bed."

"Well, good-bye for the present, we'll meet at luncheon."

"And be sure you are not late," called Mrs. Adair after him as he left the room.

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Norman always found enough to do. He stretched out his real business as a gold-beater does his leaf—to cover as much time as possible, for he could not tear himself from London, and his ingenuity in finding excuses for remaining in town was inexhaustible. He had one valid reason, and this was his contemplated purchase of a small estate with a half ruinous mansion, which had belonged to his forbears. He was by no means eager to possess it. The extreme uncertainty of his future impressed him deeply. The idea of making a home apart from Gwendoline Crichton was intolerable to him, and to leave England—to throw himself into his profession was equally im-

possible. To have half the world between himself and the helpless woman who had drawn his soul to her, and to whom he might be of use—was not to be thought of. “No,” he reflected, “better turn country gentleman and live near the border on my own land. There, at least, I should be within a few hours of her, should she need me. She must learn to look on me as a brother. I must keep myself well in hand, and rule my lips, my eyes, so that she never can suspect how utterly she possesses me. Have I ever betrayed myself? Once, only once I feared I did—but I think I was mistaken. To a woman like Gwen—wifehood, motherhood, seem ramparts such as none can overpass, while to me—well, they do not exist! Yet she is right—society has claims on all its members.”

So musing Adair made his way to his lawyer's, for during his early youth he had lived with his mother in London, and she had had much need of legal advice, as their affairs had been left in considerable confusion on the death of her husband. The family solicitor therefore was a friendly acquaintance as well as a legal adviser, and Norman found it something of a relief to talk with him on

matters and things in general until it was time for a quick drive to Regent's Park.

He soon found the Ogilvies' abode, and was ushered into a small drawing room where his mother and sister were already installed.

When his name was announced a young lady rose abruptly from the sofa on which she was sitting beside Effie. A tall girl with broad and slightly high shoulders and a waist too small for her other dimensions. A quantity of red hair was coiled and plaited and rolled in a big knot at the back of her head, and looped rather than braided over her brow. She had light grey eyes—with thick red lashes, and a large, laughing, good-humoured mouth—indeed, the lower part of her face seemed large in proportion to her forehead, and the sun had bestowed a liberal allowance of kisses in the shape of freckles on her brow and neck, even on her large, plump, white hands.

"So this is Norman!" she cried in a ringing voice, and with a strong Scotch accent. "I'm sure I should never have known him. Why, he has grown quite big. You used to be such a little fellow—I could thrash you with one hand. I suppose you don't remember me?"

"I do indeed! That is—I remember what you *were*—but I do not think I should have dared to claim you as an acquaintance in the street. Perhaps an unacknowledged dread of those thrashings dwelt with me. For it seems to me that as you were strong—so you were *not* merciful."

"But you were! However I punished you, you never kicked my shins like that nasty, mean, little beggar, Archie McKilligen."

"Then I presume there may be peace between us, Miss Ogilvie?"

"That there may! I am always glad to see old friends. Here, sit down. The general has just gone to see that things are in order. He is such a fidgety old dear, you never knew anything like it," to Mrs. Adair. "He thinks me quite too easy going and careless."

"I am sure he thinks you what you are, one of the best and cleverest of daughters," said Mrs. Adair caressingly.

"Eh!—that's a large order!" said Miss Ogilvie, laughing.

"Ah, Mr. Adair," said the general, entering and beaming on the company. "Punctual to the minute, I see. Nothing like the services for teaching

exactitude—made friends with my daughter, I see !”

“Yes, sir—we are—at any rate I am looking forward with pleasure to cementing our friendship by fighting our battles o’er again !”

“Your battles !” repeated General Ogilvie, rubbing his hands.

“Yes, papa !” cried his daughter. “When you were away in India thrashing the darkies, I was improving Norman by a severe, but salutary system of thrashing over here—when I used to go for a holiday to Mrs. Adair. Oh ! he was such a naughty boy.”

“’Pon my word ! It seems I have a formidable daughter !” cried the general, looking at her admiringly.

“Luncheon is ready,” said the house slavey, who was decked in a clean cap and apron, her face shining from an energetic application of soap, from which, however, one smear across the left jaw had escaped, to stamp its suggestion on her reformed aspect.

The general gallantly offered his arm to Mrs. Adair, and they descended to a dull diminutive dining-room, where a newly lighted fire was crackling and sputtering.

There was very good hot soup, but the rest of the repast, which was excellent, was evidently the result of a foraging expedition to Fortnum and Mason's, or some such emporium of goodies.

The general was the soul of hospitality, and mingled his Indian and sporting stories with much pressing of his guests to eat and to drink—the young hostess seconding him effusively, and, moreover, setting a good example. As soon as the sharp edge was taken off her appetite, she hastened to give her opinions on every person, and every topic mentioned in the course of conversation ; she was full of curiosity concerning Norman's life and adventures—and interfered rather with her own clearness and fluency of speech by frequently popping sweeties into her mouth, then handing the little dishes round, expressing by pantomime how very good they were.

Adair, who was much amused, laughed and chaffed her in a very unceremonious fashion, but she took everything in good part, and much noise and laughter ensued.

General Ogilvie, however, contrived to describe several lodgings in the neighbourhood which he

recommended Mrs. Adair to look at, offering to escort her himself.

As the weather was not propitious, it was proposed that Effie and her hostess should stay at home, and try over some duets—which would be very nice, Miss Ogilvie observed, to play together, should they become neighbours.

The general and his guest therefore started on the quest, leaving the three young people together. Miss Ogilvie immediately sought for the duets and found them. Then she sang, "The Laird o' Cockpen," in a strong, but not unmusical voice, with abundant expression. This brought Norman to the utmost verge of his patience, and pleading an old engagement, he made his adieux. Miss Ogilvie ran to the window and kissed her hand to him in the most unblushing fashion, then returning to the fireside, pulled up a chair and placed her feet on the fender.

"Eh, Effie dear," she exclaimed, after a moment's pause, "your brother's grown 'a braw laddie.' Why, he's taller than I am, and broad chested ; there's a de'il in his eye too."

"Don't say that, Jessie. He is a real good fellow ; quiet and steady I've heard mother say. I'm sure he is a kind brother to me."



"Why, you would not quarrel with a young man for having a spice of the devil in him?"

"I don't know—but I do not like to hear Norman spoken of as if he were no better than other young men."

"Well, I dare say he is not—but he is a good deal pleasanter than most of them. Who is he engaged to?"

"Engaged? He is not engaged. I do not think he will marry. He does not seem to care about girls," she added reflectively.

Miss Ogilvie looked at her with eyebrows uplifted, and then laughed unrestrainedly.

"Well, Effie, you are a silly billy—not care about girls! Don't tell me that. How long is it since you have been living with Norman?"

"Oh, nearly three years."

"Much you know then about his goings on. I dare say he has engaged himself to some one in nearly every port. Sailors are all like that."

"Oh, Jessie! how can you say so? Norman is the soul of honour."

"Who says he isn't? I do not suppose any one will be a penny the worse—and he'll marry a sensible Britisher after all."

"I am sure I hope he will—and be happy. Do you think him handsome?"

"He is quite good-looking enough, but it's the fun and spirit about him that takes me. I am afraid he thought me a bit brazen—with my talk about thrashing."

"Oh, no, not he. I am sure he likes a girl of spirit, and yet he feels for my sorrow."

"Why? What's the matter with you, dearie?" Whereupon Effie poured out her woes and wrongs to a not peculiarly sympathetic listener—for Miss Ogilvie's estimate of a semi-foreign fiddler coincided with Mrs. Adair's.

"Why didn't he run away with you?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, Jessie! How could you think of such an awful thing?"

"Hoot toot, my lassie!—all would have come right then—people always give in to what can't be helped. Your mother would have cried a bit—and your brother would have sworn a bit—and then you'd have made friends. To be sure he might have turned out a brute. I mean your sweetheart—so——"

"A brute!" interrupted Effie, "why, he was one

of the noblest, the most exalted souls that ever breathed——”

“Oh, I was talking of the man—not his soul. Eh! Here’s Mrs. Adair and Papa.”

These dignitaries had returned from their “quest,” Mrs. Adair in an exultant frame of mind. They had found the very thing—“the upper part of a most respectable house, not half a mile off, in St. Peter’s Avenue; a drawing-room and dining-room behind it; three bedrooms, cooking, fires—everything—only three and a half guineas a week—and we pay nigh six for our two rooms where we are.

“And the landlady is a nice, homely, civil-spoken woman—who can make Scotch broth—as one of her lodgers, a Scotchman, taught her. I’ll just take Norman to see the rooms to-morrow, and move in the day after.”

“I’m sure I’d be well pleased to stay on and be near Jessie!” said Miss Adair, in a melancholy voice.

“And we will too,” added her mother; “only I will not have you in the doleful dumps.”

“No, that we won’t,” echoed Jessie. “Here’s tea—and we must settle about seeing *The Two Roses*—now that we have *you* to go with.”

## CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Adair escaped from the snares of Miss Ogilvie, he directed his steps towards Sutherland Gardens, thinking hard as he walked briskly along. Should he call a second time in the same day to enquire about the sick child? He had suddenly developed a degree of caution which surprised himself. His mother's faint, yet perceptible, feeling of disapprobation, had put him on his guard, and he felt in his inmost heart, the obligation which lay upon him to defend Mrs. Crichton from the shadow of blame or suspicion. Yes! he decided he would enquire for the little sufferer, about whom he was sincerely concerned, but he would not ask to see the mother, and after he would pay Miss Hill a visit; she would be able to tell him much. He called the first cab he met, and was soon at Mrs. Crichton's door.

"Master George was rather worse," the servant told him. "But the doctor said the disorder was running its usual course. There was a note for Mr. Adair." He seized it eagerly—and read—

"I must not see you, lest I might take infection to you. My poor darling is very feverish—but not, I think, suffering much pain. Have sent away the other children—many, many thanks for your kind sympathy—this is good-bye for the present. You must not enter the house till we have a clean bill of health.

"Yours,

"G. CRICHTON."

"Who has gone with the children?" asked Adair, looking up from the note.

"Nurse, sir. The doctor sent in a regular sick nurse this afternoon, so that Mrs. Crichton might get a little rest."

"Glad to hear it—good morning." He turned from the house and walked away to Myrtle Grove.

"Ah! Norman—I quite expected you," was his salutation from the invalid, whose usually pale face was flushed, and her eyes lit up with eager anxiety. "This is a bad business about poor little Georgie! Of course, I haven't seen my sister—but wonderful to relate, I had a visit from my brother-in-law about noon to-day. He had come back to see the doctor, and they decided the

children must leave the house. Mr. Crichton came here to enquire about rooms, and succeeded in securing two next door. "I did what I could to help him—and of course shall have the dear things in here every day," she paused.

"Mrs. Crichton will wear herself out," ejaculated Adair.

"I hope it will not be a long business. I fear more for the after effects. George is a strong little fellow, but a bad subject for fever. Oh, Gwen would stand it all well enough, if we could only put Mr. Crichton out to board. There is no rest for Gwen, when he is in the house. Why, when he was here this morning, he talked as if it was all his mother's fault that the poor child took the disorder. If Gwen had been a foreseeing woman, she would have taken precautions; she would have gone round to the school every second day and cross-examined the teachers as to the existence of any infectious ailment among the children! That is the kind of cheerful, sympathetic conversation Gwen will be treated to whenever she puts her head out of her sick room. That man riles me—as nothing else does—and yet I smile and agree with him slavishly, just to

keep things quiet. Ah ! Norman ; there is nothing so immoral as poverty and dependence. Suppose I spoke the truth, which is always on the tip of my tongue, to that man, fancy what revenge he would take on that martyr sister of mine. Whatever happens, I must not cross him."

Adair murmured something, and then asked :

"What in the name of Heaven tempted her to marry Crichton ?"

"We were very poor, certainly," said Mary Hill immediately, "but it wasn't *that*—not chiefly. Do you know, she was *really* and truly in love with the creature. He was quite wild about her. I sometimes wonder if he can be the same man he was. He did seem a good fellow in those days. Why, I believed in him myself!" There was a short silence. Adair could not speak. A thrill of passionate jealousy shivered through him. It was at times an agony to think that the woman he so fondly loved, owed wifely duty to this mere animal, but to hear that she once loved him—was his, heart and soul—this was real torture. What an awakening she must have had ! As this thought arose in his brain, Miss Hill resumed : "I often think that poor dear Gwen's worst bit of her

thorny road was when she was finding him out, and had not quite given up hope! How awfully bad she used to look in those days. I do think that, but for the children, she would have died, or run away from him. Now, you see, he has lost much of his power of tormenting, and she bears with him as an inevitable evil, but it is a cruel lot! The man, too, will live for ever. I sometimes think how things will go when those dear children grow up. He dotes on them now when they are helpless, inoffensive children; but how will it be when they develop wills and characters? Ah! well, there is no use in anticipation!"

"There is not indeed," said Adair, leaning his head on his hand, and his elbow on the table.

"It is awful to think about," he went on after a brief silence, "and I can see no remedy."

"Nor I; I am not sure that, crippled and imprisoned as I am, my lot is not better than Gwen's, and we can be of little or no use, only I can at least be at hand to say a word in season to shield her in some small matter, as the mouse helped the lion."

"And can I not at least help her through you, Miss Hill?" exclaimed Adair, with sudden animation.



"Ah, you are a good fellow for thinking of it, but you had better keep out of it. You, a young man, and I will say a taking young man, had better keep out of it; you would only add fuel to the fire; besides, in a month or so you might be at the other side of the world."

"No, I have made up my mind not to go to sea again. Britain has many a worthier son to do her fighting and cruising for her. I have nearly made up my mind to buy an old place in Galloway which was my grandfather's. Then I'll turn farmer and country gentleman, and never be far out of your reach."

Miss Hill looked at him with a long, penetrating look.

"What you had better do," she said rather significantly, "is to choose a nice suitable wife, then settle down on your farm."

Adair laughed. "I fancy my mother thinks the desired article is found," he said. "She introduced me just now to a tall, handsome countrywoman of mine, a bright, laughing, bonnie lassie, who looks the picture of health and happiness."

"Then you might go further and fare worse," said Miss Hill sententiously.

“Very likely. However, I am not going further, not even so far. I don’t feel like a marrying man. Now, Miss Hill, my dear old friend, will you enter into a compact with me ?”

“What are the terms of the treaty, first, Norman?”

“Nothing you would object to. It is that you will constantly keep me informed of your sister, that in any emergency you will let me help *you* and her ; money can do a great deal, and thank God I have that great gift. Now difficulties may arise which can be even partially relieved by the application of a golden salve, or by personal treatment. Promise, promise faithfully to send for me should you need help.”

“This is a big offer, Norman, and I do not see how I could avail myself of it, nor how you could give assistance even if I did ask. If, however, I should be in sore need, I will ask your help.”

“Thank you,” said Adair in a low tone.

And they were again silent.

Miss Hill broke the silence by remarking that the children had not long left her, and spoke of the nurse who was such a trustworthy woman and especially devoted to Mrs. Crichton.

The conversation dragged on a little, for both

were thinking what they did not care to put into words.

Then Adair rose.

"You say my young friends are near you here?"

"Yes, next door."

"Then I will go in and have a look at them Good-bye, till to-morrow. I hope it will not bore you if I call pretty well every day?"

"Bore, my dear boy, there is no such word in my vocabulary. I hate some people and things, I like others, but I have no half-way house of boredom. It will be a kindness of course."

Adair found his little favourites at tea; they hailed him with the liveliest joy, and Nurse herself was scarcely less effusive in her greeting. Cup and saucer were soon brought, and Uncle Norman eagerly pressed to eat and drink. Then he was told Winnie's version of their removal, of how angry papa was because Georgie was ill, "though Georgie could not help it, you know; and mother was vexed too, and she did not even come and kiss them before they came away, though she cried. Yes, Nurse said she *did*. Jane, the nurse-maid, saw her, that is the reason Jane thought Georgie was going to die."

"Die! Stuff and nonsense, Miss Winnie. What they call scarlatina isn't much worse than a cold with a bad sore throat," cried nurse, who felt rather cross and uncomfortable. She would have liked to be sharing her mistress's watch over the little patient, yet she would not have Winnie and baby under any other guardianship but her own, away from home too.

"Tell us a story," whispered Winnie, stealing her arm coaxingly round Adair's neck. "I love your stories; tell me about the captain's dog and the big crab."

"Don't tease Mr. Adair, Miss Winnie. I'll bring you a picture-book, and you will sit quiet like a good girl while I put baby to bed."

"Stay with me," whispered Winnie to her big playfellow, and her earnest and imploring eyes looked startlingly like her mother's.

"Yes, darling," said Adair, gathering her up in his arms. "I will stay and tell you stories till you are taken off to bed."

"Well, I never did see the like of that, Mr. Adair," said Nurse to herself, as she carried off the sleepy baby. Then a grand time ensued for Winnie as she sailed with Adair through the Coral

Islands of the Pacific—or roamed with him over the scorching sands of Africa, or played hide-and-seek with a preternaturally wise old lion among the caves of the Moon Mountains.

It was quite six o'clock when Adair was released—and he went away to his abode to write a few letters, and dress for dinner.

It so happened that he was engaged to dine at the same house where, some seven or eight months before, he had first met Mr. and Mrs. Crichton ; and while he dressed and drove there—while he smiled and talked conventional chatter to his neighbour at table, the story of his life since kept repeating itself to him as though he was recounting it to somebody else. How strong the tie between Gwendoline and himself had grown—how inextricably their lives had become entwined ! Did she feel it too ? Should he ever be able to open his heart to her ? Who could dare to say that there was sin or degradation in the passion she had inspired ?

Then a vision of her watching by her boy's bedside came to him ; prayer had brought her peace ; the child was sleeping more calmly, when the door opens softly to admit Crichton, who,

in a whisper, finds fault with the temperature, the amount of light, the arrangement of the bed—of the table, with medicine and cooling drink ; and at last he leaves his wife nervously distrustful of herself, feverishly impatient for the moment when Nurse should return to begin her watch ! What strength and calm she had gathered in the quiet of the sick room shattered and driven away by the murmurings of suppressed indignation at her stupidity.

“So sorry,” said the hostess, as she bade the popular sailor officer good-night, “that Mr. and Mrs. Crichton could not come to us to-night. Their sweet little boy is rather seriously unwell, and of course Mrs. Crichton could not leave him—she is a very devoted mother.”

Adair replied by some polite nothings, and departed.

The rain was over, the wind had changed ; a slight touch of frost had helped to dry the streets, and Adair walked homeward under the star-spangled sky. It was too late to look in on his mother and hear the result of her search for rooms. How ardently he hoped she and Effie would leave town. He would be painfully hampered by their presence. Moreover, he feared his

good mother's match-making propensities. Here a hand, laid suddenly on his shoulder, made him start. He had reached Hyde Park Corner, and there were plenty of people still about.

"Hollo! Adair?" cried a familiar voice. "You are the very man I want."

"Ayrton!" said Norman, recognising his Dragoon chum; "I thought you were in Ireland."

"I was, but I am now on my way to India. Have exchanged into the —th Hussars, and am to sail on Saturday. Some fellows are coming to sup with me at the 'Criterion.' You know several of them. I have been to your place to look for you. Come along, and we'll have a night of it."

"All right," returned Adair, glad to be taken away from his own thoughts, and hailing a cab, he and his friend started to hold their "*reveillon*."

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When Adair presented himself to his mother and sister next morning, it was earlier than he usually made his appearance, and, rather to his surprise, he found both ladies surrounded by the disorder of packing. Effie and their maid actively occupied in doing up parcels and filling bags with several and numerous *impedimenta*

omitted or forgotten when closing their trunks. Mrs. Adair was sitting by a writing-table—a long bill before her—and a dismayed expression on her countenance.

“Good morning, mother. How are you, Effie? Why, what’s up?—going to decamp?”

“Yes, Norman; and not an hour too soon! This is a terrible costly place. Just look at the ‘sum *tottle*’ for a week. I paid up last Thursday, and see what it comes to in one week!”

“It’s not worse than any other hotel would be, mother; but as I recommended it, you leave this bill to me. But where are you going?”

“You are a kind, open-handed laddie, my son, and I thank you. It’s right you should help your own, but don’t be too ready to treat strangers the same; give them the close fist. I expected to see you last night, and sat up till half-past ten, hoping to see you.”

“Very sorry, mother. But I went to a farewell supper a chum of mine, who is off to India the day after to-morrow, was giving.”

“Ah, weel—I’m hoping you have no headache the morning—considering,” significantly——

“No; no such thing—none of the men I met are



drinkers. There is really not much of that sort of thing nowadays. But where are you going?"

"To a nice, quiet lodging near where our friends, the Ogilvies, are stopping. A neat, well-kept house, with a bit garden in front; a very *ceevil*-spoken widow-woman gives me all the accommodation Effie and I want—fire and gas—and service for three pounds a week! Why, at that rate, my dearie, I can stay a couple of months longer in London, and Effie thinks she'd like to try that new system of electric baths and massage. It's strength she wants, the creature, and it will be just life to her having a bright girlie like Jessie for a companion."

"Very likely. Well, mother, if you have taken this place, there's no more to be said about it, only I'm afraid it is rather out of the way."

"Not for quiet bodies like us. Yes, Norman, I did wait, hoping to see you last night, but I telegraphed early this morning to say we'd go into dinner at six o'clock this day. I am going to send Susan up with the luggage just now. Then Effie and I will have a bit of lunch somewhere, for we are going to a concert at St. James' Hall in the afternoon. Miss Ogilvie has given us tickets; she's engaged herself to luncheon at Lady

McCleod's, and they are going to tea at some artist's place after. Eh! Norman, they know just a heap o' real distinguished people!"

"I daresay," said Adair, vaguely. "You had better lunch with me at the St. James' Restaurant, mother. Then you are on the spot. I wish if you had time you would call and enquire for the Crichtons' boy and leave cards."

"Well, maybe I can, after the concert, though Sutherland Gardens are quite out of the way of St. John's Wood; can't you leave my card, Norman, when you are enquiring?"

"No; it wouldn't be at all the same thing. I have been up there this morning. The poor little chap has had a very bad night."

"Already! My patience, you are awful anxious about the bairn."

"Of course I am. It's not about him only. Just think what a blow it would be to his mother—I mean the parents—if this sickness ended fatally."

"No doubt it would; that man Crichton seems a real good father, doting on his little ones, but not weak, as I fancy the poor mother is. Weel, Norman, I'll be sure to call this afternoon."

"That's right. What o'clock is it?—twelve. Why

don't you get away? It looks awfully uncomfortable here; have a carriage and drive to Sutherland Gardens, make your enquiries, and then call on Miss Hill and see the other children. They are in lodgings next door to her; she would take it as a great kindness. The little Crichton girl Winnie is such a sweet little soul—the image of her mother! I am sure I hope——” he checked the coming words, with a quick thought and changed them to “I hope she will grow up like her,” from “I hope none of them will turn out like the father!”

“Well; I'm not sure I've the time.”

“Oh, yes, mother!” cried Effie, who had not spoken since greeting her brother. “There will be loads of time. I should like to see those dear children and Mary Hill. Oh! I am so sorry for Mrs. Crichton. It will break her heart if she were to lose that bonnie boy!”

“Hoot, toot!” said her mother. “Scarlatina is just a trifle; if it were scarlet fever indeed.”

“I believe there is no difference in kind—only in degree,” observed Adair. “Come, you'll be glad to get out of this. I'll order a carriage for you, and meet you at St. James' restaurant at one thirty.”

The wishes of a son who was ready and willing to pay hotel and carriage bills were not to be slighted, though, to do her justice, Mrs. Adair was as loving and admiring a mother when her boy was dependent on her widow's slender income, and equally disposed to order his life for him.

"Very well, my dearie, I'll do as you like. Tell me, Norman, isn't Jessie Ogilvie grown a fine handsome young woman, that any man might be proud of?"

"Yes, indeed. And a jolly girl, up to all sorts of fun. There's plenty of her too! I never cared for your fragile, ethereal, æsthetic women," he returned, anxious to please his womenkind.

"Eh, Norman," cried Effie, laughing, "she doesn't think much of sailors. She seems to think they have a sweetheart in every port. She asked me if you were engaged, as if some one had told her you were."

"I hope you told her that I was the steadiest of the steady—and free," he paused, "as most men are."

"That is rather ambiguous, my son," observed his mother, looking at him over her spectacles, before taking them off.

"Don't imagine me as one of the train that

follows the last dancer or singer, mother," he returned, laughing, as he left the room ; " adieu till luncheon time—one thirty, remember."

"London is a fearful place for an idle lad," said Mrs. Adair, as she put her papers together and thrust them into a capacious hand bag.

"Mother, dear," said her daughter kindly, "don't you fash yourself about Norman. He is as good as gold."

"I know that, my bairn, but the best of men is just wax in the hands of a designing woman. You don't know this wicked world, and I hope you never will. Ah! I do wish I could see your brother weel married to a good sensible woman. I'd have a light heart on his wedding day!"

"Eh, mother, don't talk of weddings, you just make my heart ache."

"Come, let us put on our bonnets," said her mother, hastily; and she left the room. Adair's plans were duly carried out, but his mother's visit to Miss Hill was not particularly successful. Mrs. Adair was particularly polite, but the keen perception and sensitive nature of the invalid told her that the visit and the civilities were not spontaneous.

"That old woman doesn't like Gwen or me," thought Miss Hill, as soon as her visitors had gone. "The girl does—and the son—I am a little puzzled about him. He seems a true-hearted gentleman—and——" Her thoughts grew confused—presently out of the chaos the idea that Gwen was a fair and lovable woman grew clear and impressive. "But she is straight and true," suggested the memory of the past, the love of the present. "No harm can come of his help, and we may need it sorely yet."

Meantime, the little sufferer, round whom gathered such tender, such contending interests, had begun to rally. His recovery was slow, however, slower than the doctor anticipated, and hope did not fully possess his mother's heart for several days. Until all fear of infection was past, she did not dare to see her other darlings, nor did Adair venture to ask for admittance. He was, however, a frequent visitor in Myrtle Grove, where he whiled away many a half hour which would have otherwise been weary for the patient invalid, and gave endless treats to Winnifred, Nurse and baby.

Mrs. Adair and her daughter, General Ogilvie and his, set themselves diligently to enjoy as much

as they could the winter amusements of London, which are fewer, perhaps, than in other capitals, owing to atmospheric difficulties.

In much of this Adair joined. Jessie Ogilvie amused him. High spirits and a daring temperament gave piquancy and apparent wit to many of her sayings, while her undisguised liking for Adair—not to say her love making—soothed his vanity, and induced a half contemptuous preference for her, which deceived Mrs. Adair, and encouraged her to think that all was going well for her hopes.

The general frequently looked in for a game of whist, Adair and Jessie making up the *partie carrée*. Effie preferred to read "poetry books," as her mother called them, or to work at an interminable piece of lace, which was a marvel of patient labour, but could be bought in a high state of perfection for less than the price of the materials.

"By George!" cried General Ogilvie, one evening when he and his daughter had walked over after dinner to pay a visit to their esteemed friend, and found Adair installed by the fireside. "I must have a rubber to-night, for I'm in an extraordinary vein of luck! I had a letter from Colonel Battersby, of the —th Carbineers, asking

if I'd let him have my house in Edinburgh for a year. He has just taken command of the regiment, and they are likely to stay another year in Auld Reekie. This just suits me. We may as well keep Christmas in London and then this girl of mine wants me to take her to the Riviera in the spring."

"Yes; I do, indeed. Fancy, I have never been on the Continent in my life! Why, Mr. Adair, I'm a mere uncultivated provincial."

"We may challenge the world to beat our home produce in some lines," returned Adair gallantly, wishing he could banish the quartette, to Rome or further for a season. He had heard that afternoon, that little Georgie was ordered to Ventnor as soon as he could be moved, and was once more building castles in the air.

Miss Ogilvie made a saucy rejoinder, and after the interchanges of some repartees, Adair asked the general: "Hasn't Colonel Battersby a son or a nephew of the same name on board the *Reliant*?"

"A son, I think," returned the general.

"I met him some ten days ago. They are at Portsmouth now, and I promised to run down and see him. We were rather chums at Malta. He is a capital fellow and a regular Paddy."



"Mr. Adair, will you take Effie and me to a music hall?" asked Jessie. "I dare say it is very shocking—but we want to be shocked!"

"Couldn't think of it! What would my mother and the general say?"

"No—a very decided No," said the veteran.

"Never mind, Miss Ogilvie, we'll do something improper, properly improper, to satisfy you. Suppose we go to hear the Christy Minstrels—and come to my rooms to supper after. I'll ask some of my fastest pals to meet you. Eh!—will that do?"

"It will be quite delightful—name the day——"

"Ah! that is a leading question," said Adair, with a mischievous glance. Miss Ogilvie blushed, and went to help Effie in opening the card table and setting out the counters.

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## CHAPTER X.

It was like a glimpse of heaven, the relief which soothed Mrs. Crichton's heart, when the doctor pronounced her darling distinctly better, and the fear of a graver and more dangerous stage of the malady passed away.

But the little fellow did not recover rapidly.

His strength did not return as rapidly as the doctor hoped, and he was ordered away to Ventnor, where Mr. Crichton escorted the boy and his mother.

It was fine weather, and quite like summer in the sheltered cottage where Mr. Crichton found rooms.

When his wife had bid him good-bye next day, and returned to her precious charge, she sighed a sigh of relief, and set herself to enjoy the rest and make the most of the breathing vouchsafed to her. It was only by diligently seizing what good the present bestowed, and resisting the depressing thoughts of the future, that Gwendoline contrived to make headway against the rough waters of her life. Now for a while she was free, she had her precious Georgie all to herself, even Nurse with her occasional interference on the score of superior experience was with the other children, and only the humble obedient nursemaid was in attendance.

After the first two days she thought she perceived a little more strength in Georgie's movements—a faint colour in his pallid cheeks. He greatly enjoyed being drawn in a light invalid carriage along the beach, and seemed to have

more relish for his food. He went to bed early, and slept for an hour or two in the day. His mother had time, too much time to think. She had not thought of bringing any books, but fortunately a good supply of needlework had been packed up for Jane to do, and on this her mistress seized. But thought is never diverted from an attractive channel by needlework, and as her deft fingers hemmed and stitched, Mrs. Crichton reflected on her absent children, her invalid sister, and her faithful friend, Norman Adair. How good he had been to Mary—and to the little ones—was there ever friendship so self-forgetful as his? When should she see him again, and thank him, and enjoy the great pleasure of a talk with him?—a real, open-hearted talk, without holding back a thought, without an instant's pause before the icy breath of caution. Then a troubled ripple of doubt crisped the placidity of her mind as she remembered almost the last confidential *tête-à-tête* conversation she had held with him—how startled she had been by his expressions of devotion to her service. This was what she would not and must not accept, for it would mean the ruin of his career. Probably he, in the excitement of his

pity for her, had unconsciously exaggerated his desire to help her, but she at least was, or ought to be, cooler and less blinded by feeling, and must keep him straight. It was her duty. Then a sudden wave of despair swept over her as she thought of life in the future without Norman. What blessed sustaining bread her friendship with him had been, but she must not let it cost him too dear! That it might be harmful to herself had not yet crossed her mind.

Letting the small frock on which she was engaged drop on her lap, she leaned her head on her hand, and looked away through the window, tears gathering in her eyes unconsciously to herself when the lodging house servant opened the door, and said, "A gentleman for you, 'm"—and, enter Adair—Mrs. Crichton started up, growing very pale as she did so, while the hand she held out to him trembled as it lay in his.

"At last!" he exclaimed, pressing it close in both his own for a moment. There was a world of expression in the words—joy and tenderness and a tinge of reproach.

"Oh! Norman. I am so glad to see you! How—how did you come here?"

"How did I come? Oh, I ran down to see an old messmate of mine at Portsmouth. I saw Crichton the evening before I left town, and told him I would pay you a visit. How is the youngster?"

"Already much better. It is quite reviving to watch him."

"I fancy you want a lot of reviving, Mrs. Crichton; you look pale, and thin, and worn." He looked at her from head to foot with such earnest searching eyes.

"No doubt I do; I have been so anxious, so——" she stopped abruptly, fearing to trust her voice, feeling she must not apply the smallest spark to the mine of passionate sympathy she felt, she knew was smouldering in his heart. "But this sweet spot—its heavenly peace and its balmy air, will give new life both to Georgie and to myself," resumed Mrs. Crichton, gathering up the reins of her self-control. "Now, tell me all the news. I have had such a long fast from the world, from my dear ones. When did you see the children and Mary?"

Adair did not speak at once. He, too, felt dizzy with the delight of being near her again,

of looking into her eyes, of hearing her speak. Then he drew a chair near the sofa, on which she was sitting in the window. "I have so many things to tell you and scarce know where to begin. First, I had tea yesterday afternoon with your sweet little daughter ; she is looking blooming, and baby is making magnificent attempts to walk. I have promised Miss Crichton to take her to the pantomime when mother comes back." He went on telling various anecdotes which were entrancing in their interest to his listener. Then he described his visits to Mary Hill, watching while he spoke, the delicate colour returning to his beloved's cheek—the light to her eyes.

"And now, Norman, tell me of yourself ; what have you been doing with your days—chiefly acting good Samaritan to my people, I think. Have you interviewed the Lords of the Admiralty yet ?"

"Are you still determined to drive me out of the country, Gwen?—I beg pardon—Mrs. Crichton——"

"That's right !" she said, with a sweet, thoughtful smile. "Gwen is dead and buried long ago, and reincarnated in Mrs. Crichton—quite another woman. But 'Norman', I am glad to think, has

undergone no change, so Norman he will always be to me."

"He is, indeed, unchanged," said Adair, in a low voice—"as utterly at your service as ever." Then in a changed and lighter tone, he resumed: "Well, Mrs. Crichton, this is the only matter in which I am going to be a rebel. I will not go to sea. I am going to turn country gentleman. To buy that place I have often spoken to you about. There is a tumble-down house on the property, and when I have put it in decent order, you must come down and pay me a visit."

"That would be charming! How the children would revel in the real country."

"You know my mother and Effie are still in town?"

"So Mary told me. They have been very kind in calling on her. Is it not cold for Miss Adair?"

"She seems fairly well, and they have met some chums—a General Ogilvie and his daughter—so there they are. As they seem so content, I am going to take a holiday. I find Portsmouth interesting, and I think of going on to Plymouth. London has been such a howling wilderness to me!" He sighed deeply, and passed his hand across his brow.

"Oh! Norman," exclaimed Mrs. Crichton, "will you not join me at my early supper? You know the nursery life I lead. You cannot go back to Portsmouth to-night?"

"No. I drove over from Ryde, and I shall return there to-night. I have taken a room there, so I can either cross to Portsmouth or roam the island as I like. Yes, I shall be glad to take a cup of tea with you or supper——"

"Or both," interrupted his hostess. "There are a couple of hours of light yet—let us take a stroll down to the beach. Georgie must not go out at this hour. He is asleep now, and will be so pleased to see you when he wakes up. I will fetch my hat and cape."

Norman took a turn or two while she was away, and then leant his shoulder against the mantel shelf. Yes; she looked pale, and thin and worn; the brilliant look which characterised her fair face was quite gone. Ordinary people might wonder why she was considered so handsome, but to him, there was an overpowering charm in the pallor, the resignation of her face. How well, how serenely she bore the gnawing of the fox beneath her cloak. What would he not have braved to have taken her



out of the moral dungeon in which she was entombed, and set her in the sunshine—the enchantment of a love-lighted life? This, in all probability, he could never do. The utmost he could accomplish was, to emulate her patient strength, to watch and wait for that opportunity of doing her service.

“Come, Norman ; I am ready.” She stood in the doorway, and he started forward to join her.

A gate at the end of the garden behind the cottage where they lodged open, and a few rough stone steps which led to the beach, and a scene of quiet beauty spread itself before them, the wide sweep of the bay, the tide slowly coming in, all flushed with the red of the sinking sun, some rocks, a distant blue point where land and water and sky seemed to blend ; a boat with a half-distended sail moving slowly seaward, a small vessel lying nearer, where the crew with their musical cry, were heaving the anchor, all spoke of peace and harmony.

“Is it not charming?” said Mrs. Crichton, softly. “I find the place infinitely soothing, yet, at this hour, if I come alone, it makes me sad.”

“Then why do you come here?”

“Oh, because you are with me, and I can tell you all I think, and that is a relief.”

"What do you think of now?"

"My mind is rather confused. Your coming startled me. Then hearing about Winnie and baby makes me long almost painfully to see them again. In another week Doctor Clayton thinks they might join us here. Then it will, indeed, be delightful. Ah! if we could only have my dear Mary here! But she always writes cheerfully."

"I thought her looking rather better. She is a wonderful woman; almost as wonderful as you are."

"Who?—me wonderful!—wonderfully weak, I fear."

"You are not weak, Mrs. Crichton!"

"Ah! Norman, no one knows the depths of my weakness—my disgraceful weakness, so well as you do. How often, when I am alone, I bless you for the great salvation you wrought for me!"

"Do not remember it! It must be painful to you. And do not blame yourself—only super-human courage would have carried you through such an ordeal unshaken. Come, I will have no more looking back, let us build castles. When I buy my old place and renovate it, you and the youngsters shall come down in a body; moreover I have a grand scheme for carrying off your sister,

Sailors are inventive, and I think I could contrive to move her without causing her great pain or inconvenience——” And he ran on to picture the moors, the hills, the heather, the Shetland ponies for the children, the country life and amusements. Mr. Crichton was not forgotten, he was to have shooting and fishing, and be coaxed into enjoying himself, returning home in good health and spirits, and believing, at any rate, for a spell, that neither his fellow-creatures, nor the devil, are as black as they are painted.

His delightful, boyish spirits cheered Mrs. Crichton wonderfully, but did not make her forget the hour for Georgie's evening meal.

They found him in the sitting-room playing ‘Loto’ with his maid. His joy at seeing Adair was great. He left his game, already half won, to sit on his knee, to hear all about Winnie and baby, and, finally, was only persuaded to go to bed by the promise that he should see Mr. Adair in the morning.

Then came a couple of heavenly hours, at least, to Adair, who determined to throw fear and caution to the winds and enjoy to the full, the feast of happiness after his long fast.

He was careful, however, to maintain the tone of a friendly, sympathetic acquaintance. He felt, rather than knew, that Mrs. Crichton understood his devotion to her, but wanted the knowledge shaded from her eyes. In this semi-voluntary blindness, he resolved to help her. So they talked on pleasantly and lightly of what had happened in politics, literature and society during Mrs. Crichton's incarceration in her boy's sick room, when the world was quite shut out.

"You don't seem to have any books with you," said Adair, glancing reluctantly at the clock.

"No. I forgot all about the possibility of reading. Now, thank God, my mind is sufficiently at rest to enjoy a book."

"Then I'll see what I can bring you the day after to-morrow. I am engaged to dine at the mess of the —th to-morrow, so I cannot see you till Thursday."

"Oh! thank you, Norman, for coming all this way. It's such a long drive back for you to Ryde."

"A very pleasant one on a night like this. They gave me a very decent horse. I was obliged to bring a man with me this time, as I did not know my way. In future, I'll be my own charioteer. If

you are writing to Crichton, tell him I fulfilled my promise, and will send him a report of you and the boy. By the way, he was to dine with my mother to-night, to meet the Ogilvies. I hope he'll amuse himself. I fancy he and the general will take to each other."

"I hope so. He does not like many people——"

"I ought to be flattered!" said Adair, grimly. The colour rose to Mrs. Crichton's brow, but she made no reply, and Adair cursed his too ready tongue.

"It is growing late, Norman, and you have a long drive before you."

"Thanks for your hint that I ought to go. Then I cannot see you till Thursday? Do you think the boy could stand a drive? We might get an open trap and take a turn round."

"I fear it is too soon for him to take a drive."

"Perhaps he will be equal to it next week."

"Next week, Norman? Shall you be here next week?"

"Yes; why not? unless"—quickly—"unless you think I had better go. I will do exactly as you desire."

"Oh! Norman. I think you might stay—that

is, we'll see." Adair flushed under his sun-burnt skin, there was such an unmistakable wish for his society in her eyes—in her voice—she did not know how much she had betrayed.

"I am entirely in your hands," said Adair, in a low tone.

"I hope the fine weather will continue," she resumed, hurriedly. "It is of the last importance to Georgie."

"I trust it may. I must be off now and get my trap at the hotel—nice little place. Why didn't you put up there? You would have had less trouble."

"Oh ; it would not have suited a sick child—besides——" she stopped.

"It is a good deal more expensive," put in Adair.

"I am not sure about that. Now, good night."

"Good night," he repeated, taking her hand. "Have you got back your sleep?—for I feel sure you rarely closed your eyes while that young gentleman was in bed." He looked into them as he spoke, with so much tenderness and compassion, that Gwen's heart ached to think she must put away all this exquisite sympathy, which, in her position, was an evil, instead of the blessing in which guise it at present masqueraded.

Then, with a sigh, he turned away, let her hand go, and left the room.

Mrs. Crichton stood long in thought, one foot on the fender, one hand on the mantel-shelf. She ought not to keep him there. It was bad for him. As to herself, nothing could harm her, safeguarded as she was by a sense of duty to her husband, and her deep love for those sweet children, who were all the world to her. But young men were weak and head-strong, and it would be a bad return for Norman's goodness and faithfulness to herself, if she let him waste much more time hanging about her, neglecting his profession and his future. "A nice young wife would be his best cure. I wish he had one—a wife worthy of him," then her thoughts grew confused, the present faded from her ken, and great tears rolled up from her heart and rolled disregarded down her cheeks as she realized, with a sense of horror at herself, what the future would be, a dark, drear, bitter wilderness, without a gleam of light, without solace of any kind, if Norman Adair was removed from it. Then she threw herself into a corner of the sofa, and thought hard, her softer mood congealing slowly into resolution and common sense. She was quite dry-eyed,

when she rose and mechanically folded up her work and put the room in order. Finally, she lit her candle, put out the lamp, and softly went to bed, if not to sleep. So in the secret chambers of the brain, action is evolved, and the destinies of life take shape.

Devout wishes carry no fulfilling power with them. Thursday brought gusty wind and driving rain. It was the first really bad day since Mrs. Crichton and her little convalescent arrived. "Norman will hardly drive over such a day as this," she thought, as she looked from the window after their early dinner, having settled Georgie for a sleep on his little bed beside her own, leaving Jane on guard. "It is quite chill too. I am glad I had the fire lit." Even while she told herself she did not expect him, she listened for the tramp of his horse's feet ; presently she sat down by the fire, and drew a letter from her pocket, to read it over a second time. After some injunctions as to the general management of affairs, the writer went on : "I dined with Mrs. Adair and her daughter last evening. She is a sensible, clear-headed old lady. I met a General Ogilvie and his daughter there, some of the right kind of people. The general is



a very distinguished officer, and seems to know every one ; as to Miss Ogilvie, she is a regular clipper, as tall as I am, an uncommon fine woman, up to fun, plenty of go, and knows how to make use of her eyes. I got on famously with her. I have a notion that Mrs. Adair has her eye on her for a daughter-in-law. I fancy she'll have a tidy fortune. I am glad of this, for it's a bad business when all the cash comes out of one pocket ; a better fellow than Adair is hard to meet. To find a girl like Miss Ogilvie, a regular flesh and blood woman, for whom a man might make a fool of himself, and yet with a balance at her bankers', is a slice of real good luck. I rather think our friend knows it, for, from the chaff that went on, I fancy they must have been going it rather strong. It would be a right good suitable marriage for both of them. As to the children——"

Mrs. Crichton did not re-read that part. She folded up the letter, and laid it on a table with her writing things, and taking up her sewing, plied her needle diligently, a look of deep thought settling on her face.

Yes ; it would, indeed, be well, if Norman Adair found a really lovable, suitable wife, she thought.

She hoped she would be brave enough to wish he might, otherwise she feared he would drift into an aimless, wandering kind of life, and miss the career which was opening to him. He might not be a brilliant man, but he certainly could be an eminently useful one ; as she came to this conclusion, the sounds of horses' feet and of wheels reached her ears. They stopped—there was a breathless pause. Then the door opened, and Adair, damp and ruddy from his drive in the teeth of wind and rain, came smiling into the room.'

"How's a' wi' ye?" he said, with a strong Scotch accent, which he could put on at pleasure. "I suppose you hardly expected me——"

"No, indeed, Norman! Our beautiful weather did not last long."

"It will come back again, the wind is chopping round to the sou'-west——why, Mrs. Crichton—you are looking——"

"You must not be uncomplimentary; tell me what you have been doing since Tuesday?"

"Oh! I have been rather amusing myself; first, I have brought you a selection of books. I trust they may please you. I felt rather nervous about choosing them. There's a splendid book, 'The

Dilemma,' an Indian Mutiny story. Then there are sermons by Huxley. He is not a parson, is he? I met a naval chaplain at dinner, last night, who recommended it. Then there's the Quarterly, with a capital article on Dundonald—a man I have a great admiration for—and some other things—Folklore—which I thought might be in your line. If you will only tell me any others you would like, I shall be so glad to get them for you. I left the parcel outside when I took off my coat."

"My best thanks, Norman; you have provided me with many days' entertainment; the books are all new to me, that is the great point."

"Tell me," said Adair, whose eyes had dwelt on her eagerly, while she spoke, "have you slept well? Have you generally been undisturbed, since we parted?"

"Yes, indeed, I have been quite tranquil, and Georgie has been very satisfactory——"

"That is well! What a splendid fire," drawing a chair beside it. "I say, Mrs. Crichton. How is it that you make a room look as if you had lived in it a hundred years?"

"Do I—do I make you feel comfortable, Norman?"

"Do not ask me!" he said, looking steadily down; "do not ask me. If I answered truly, you would——Ah! Don't mind my weak-minded babble. There is a stern composure about you to-day, which awes me."

"Simply the result of a long, lonely day yesterday. Your visit will make me brisk and volatile."

"I am afraid not; but I remember when you were the most buoyant of creatures, Gwen—daring, self-reliant—and a trifle conceited, eh?"

"I am afraid I was," laughing.

"Thought no end of yourself? How we used to quarrel; you despised me in those days, as a slow coach, and I believe I hated you, for your superior brain power."

"That was only the more rapid maturing of the slighter plant. What should I make of navigation, for instance, now that I am at my prime, and some one was saying you are very strong in that complicated science."

"I think you would be interested in the theory of it at any rate. It is wonderful and beautiful."

"Ah, Norman, you would be more successful ploughing the deep than the broad acres."

"I will not be driven into exile, even by *you*!"

He said it good humouredly, but his brows contracted. Mrs. Crichton did not pursue the subject, and Adair left the room to fetch the books he had brought, about which they talked for a while. Then Mrs. Crichton said, "I had a letter from home this morning, with a very good account of Winnie and baby. Dr. Clayton says they may come down on Saturday. Then I shall be quite at rest. Mr. Crichton seems to have enjoyed his dinner with your mother, Norman. They have quite taken to each other. He met your friends the Ogilvies, who were also at dinner, and has apparently lost his heart to the young lady, she seems handsome, and full of *esprit*."

"Yes! Handsome, that's just what she is! As to *esprit*, that's giving a very delicate title to her particular style of humour, which bears about the same relation to wit as cudgel play to fencing. She is just 'a braw lassie,' yet forgive me if I say that under your circumstances, I wish to God you were like her."

"Indeed?" she said, smiling. "Why?"

"I must leave that to your imagination. She has the elasticity of steel springs, great would be the weight, heavy the blow that could break it.

"I fear that Saturday to Monday, with no one but myself and the children to amuse him will be a little wearisome."

"Only *you* ! Ah, yes, he is to be pitied !"

"My dear Norman, you ought to remember I am only his wife—and we have been married more than nine years."

"I wonder should I be sick of a wife in nine years ?"

"You might of a wife—but not of the right kind of wife. Though—it is hard to say ! Matrimony is a tremendous experiment."

"Do you think it would help Mr. Crichton over the dulness of his stay, if I came over on Saturday and Sunday ?"

"‘Twas an angel spoke,’ as my Irish nurse used to say," exclaimed Mrs. Crichton, her face lighting up. "But will it not bore you, dear Norman ? Your naval and military friends must be so much more congenial."

"What does that count against a little help to you ? Yes, Gwen, I can help you. I can lighten your load. Why do you try to reject help which costs you nothing—never shall cost you anything ?"

"Because I am not a monster of selfishness, but

this offer I will accept. Mr. Crichton so much prefers the company of men."

"All right, then. I will come over to dinner and put up at the little inn here. Then you and Crichton must dine with me on Sunday. I haven't had you to dinner for ages. We'll have champagne and a regular spread, it will fill up the time. They say there is a very good cuisine at this quiet little place—and shall I ask Battersby? He is a good-natured, noisy, talkative Irishman."

"Oh, yes, do! How good you are, Norman."

"No; I am not. But come, sit down and take your work. Shall I read you one of Huxley's sermons? *That*, at least, is a blameless proceeding!"

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## CHAPTER XI.

MORE than a week had elapsed, and still Adair made no sign—to his mother's great indignation. He had only written once since his departure for Portsmouth, and Mr. Crichton had mentioned that he intended paying Mrs. Crichton a visit. That he was still at Portsmouth, Mrs. Adair believed—for General Ogilvie's new tenant mentioned that his son had been having fine rigs with his former

messmate, Adair, and had heard of Miss Ogilvie as looking first-rate.

In this frame of mind, Mrs. Adair could hardly suppress an exclamation of "Oh, be joyful," when her maid announced "Mr. Crichton," on the Sunday following that gentleman's expedition to Ventnor.

"You see I have taken the working man's only holiday, to pay my respects to you, Mrs. Adair," he said, with his pleasant air of frank bonhomie.

"And I'm sure I am well pleased to see you, Mr. Crichton, specially as I am all by myself. Effie's away with the general and Miss Ogilvie, to see if the water in Regent's Park is likely to bear skating."

"I'm afraid the wind is changing to west, and the frost is gone for the present. It is a changeable climate. To be sure, Ventnor is very south, but this day week we couldn't stand our winter wraps, walking on the beach there."

"And how did you find Mrs. Crichton and the bairns?"

"Right well, I thank you. The boy has made a first-rate recovery. He has grown, and has got a colour. I'll leave them all there for ten days



longer. Then Mrs. Crichton must come home and put the house in order, for I have had a deuced bad time of it."

"So has she, I daresay."

"Oh, yes; she's a nervous woman, a bit of a coward. Loses her head in fact—very charming and sweet of course—but not able to stand alone, not a minute; needs some one at her elbow every hour of the day, and unfortunately the bread winner can't exactly stay at home to see that the servants do their duty, and don't eat you out of house and home."

"No, no, of course not," said Mrs. Adair, sympathetically; "and pray, Mr. Crichton, did you happen to see my son?"

"Aye; that I did, every day. He is looking right well and enjoying himself—quite another man out of London. He has high jinks with my youngsters, I assure you. He came over and dined with us on Saturday, and put up at a little inn close by, where he gave us as good a dinner as I'd wish to eat—on Sunday. Then he came on to Portsmouth with me on Monday and there I left him. He said, as well as I remember, he was going on to Plymouth that night or next day.

He's a capital fellow, Mrs. Adair, you may be proud of him."

"I'm much obliged by your good opinion; and my son was going on to Plymouth? Eh! I am sure I do not know what acquaintance he has down there."

"Why, my dear madam, a young chap who has knocked about in the navy, knows a lot more than his own people have an idea of."

"Any way, it is better for him to be meeting men of his own profession, than playing pranks with children," said the mother, in a tone of satisfaction.

"Oh! a man can't always be on stilts," said Crichton. "You should persuade your son to marry, Mrs. Adair! The holy state of matrimony has its drawbacks—but on the whole, a man had better settle down—marriage helps him on—and——"

Here the sound of voices and footsteps approaching made Crichton pause, then the door opened and Effie, Miss Ogilvie and the general walked in.

The cold air and a brisk walk had freshened the roses in their cheeks. Miss Ogilvie had a very becoming costume of green cashmere and velvet—

and a large green velvet hat, amply supplied with plumes, crowned what Mrs. Adair in her familiar and effusive moments called "her bonnie *reed heed*."

"Ah! Mr. Crichton, we thought we were never to see you again, that you had enough of us at that one dinner! In fact, we are too slow a lot for you," cried the lively Jess.

"Slow! that is the last crime *you* could be accused of. Good day, general. How do you do, Miss Adair? I've been away to see the wife and bairns! I took the eldest and youngest with me, and left them all uncommonly jolly."

"I have no doubt they are, and Mr. Adair, too——"

"Oh, very likely he is. He was going on to Plymouth."

"Oh; well, he has returned to Portsmouth! I went to see Miss Hill this morning after church. A famous Free Kirk man preaches near by her place and she told me how Mr. Adair had been down to Ventnor on Friday, I think it was, and took them all for a lovely drive to some castle. I never knew a young man so taken up with babies as Mr. Adair."

"Shows what a capital husband he'll make, Miss Ogilvie."

"I'm not so sure. I should not like to come second, even to my own babies."

"A woman like you could never be second to anything."

"Ah, Mr. Crichton, you are not the sort of man I should expect flattery from !"

"You are right there, Miss Ogilvie. I never do flatter."

"Oh, oh, oh !"

"I didn't think Adair would be back so soon. Mrs. Crichton's last letter was dated Thursday, so I suppose he hadn't turned up then. I suppose he'll be in town to-morrow."

"Well, *I* don't expect to see Mr. Adair, as long as the babies and Mrs. Crichton are at Ventnor."

A look of discomfort crept over Mrs. Adair's face.

"Come, Miss Ogilvie, a sailor is accustomed to a lot of rope ; you cannot expect him to be pinned to your apron all at once," said Crichton, laughing.

"Young lassies' high spirits sometimes run away with their tongues," observed Mrs. Adair, in a slightly disapproving tone.

"Right, Mrs. Adair," cried the general, who had been comforting himself with a glass of sherry which Mrs. Adair had ordered. "Jess never stops to think. The moment she has an idea, out it comes."

His daughter cast a scarcely-veiled contemptuous glance at him. "Oh, yes; of course I am a great fool," she exclaimed. "Never mind, Mr. Crichton, fool or no fool, I generally get my own way."

"Of course you do! who could have the heart to contradict you? But there's uncommon little fool's flesh about you. Miss Adair seems bearing the winter in foggy London wonderfully well," he continued, addressing her mother, for he felt she was being left out in the cold, as most people were, when Jess Ogilvie chose to monopolise the conversation.

"Yes, thank God. She is much stronger, I think. We may stay on till early spring, when the east winds are due. Then we'll go away south."

"Then I would advise you to try Ventnor. It's a very pleasant, sheltered place."

"Yes, Effie, and your brother's so fond of it, he will be sure to join you there, and give you nice drives."

"It's an uncommon quiet spot, you must remember. I can't say *I* could stand it for more than a couple of days. Ladies are different!"

"I'm sure, Mr. Crichton, I do not see why we are to be moped either," cried Jess.

"No—of course not—nor are you! All the plums are for the women."

"Oh! are they, though? I say, Mr. Crichton, will you do me the honour of dining with me on my birthday? I shall be twenty to-morrow week—and the general is going to give a dinner at the Criterion; we couldn't manage it in a lodging; a lot of people have been very nice and civil, and we must return it in some way."

"Gad! it's the first I've heard of it!" exclaimed the general, with a dismayed look.

"Never mind, dad; it's time enough. You'll come, won't you?—and perhaps Mrs. Crichton will come. I am longing to know her. Then we may reckon on Mr. Adair. He has grown such a stranger, I never think of calling him 'Norman' now."

"Oh, poor fellow, that is too hard. I'm sure I am delighted to accept your kind invitation, but I am not sure my wife will be in town then; anyhow, you can count on Adair, I am certain."

Miss Ogilvie shook her head.

Then the general made some remark on a political question, and the two men had some talk over a little more sherry, and Crichton took his leave.

"I've not had half exercise enough," said Ogilvie. "I'll walk part of the way with you."

When the men were gone Effie went upstairs to take off her outdoor garments, and Jess—a somewhat sulky look on her face—sat looking out of the window, evidently not seeing anything near at hand. The moment they were alone Mrs. Adair closed the book she had taken up, and exclaimed very earnestly :

"Lord's sake, dearie, don't be so outspoken ; that man Crichton is good enough, but if ye raise the deevil o' jealousy in him, why, Norman's life wouldn't be safe !"

"Jealousy—Norman ? What do you mean, Mrs. Adair ?" cried Jess, removing her hat and throwing it impatiently on a chair. "I spoke at random—I meant nothing ! I must have hit *something*, or you would not be so serious. Does Norman make love to Mrs. Crichton, or does Mrs. Crichton make love to him ? You are not too pleased to see him hanging about those bairns o' hers—I can see that.

Are they deceiving Crichton? My word, *he* is no fool, and believe me, I won't be fooled either"—an angry light gleamed in her grey eyes.

"My patience, Jess, you do run on. Why, what do you take my son for?—a well-brought-up, honest-hearted laddie, with no thought of harm—that would just shrink from the idea of making love to another man's wife—I'm ashamed to hear you!"

"Suppose another man's wife made love to him?" cried Jess, still at a white heat. "Do you suppose he would be any wiser or better than his neighbours? Not he! They are all pretty much alike—the men!"

"Dear, dear, Jess, my girlie, I'm frightened to hear you!"

"If your son is going to waste his life running after a married woman, he ought not to pretend to take pleasure in the company of unmarried girls—it's not honest—and you should tell him so, Mrs. Adair!"

This was too much for the proud mother, and eager as she was to pacify the girl she wished to call "daughter," she could not hold back the indignant words: "Do you think I can sit here and hear you misrepresent my boy, who is the soul of



honour, without giving you your answer, Jess Ogilvie? It's not right, it isn't maidenly, to go into your tantrums because he is beguiled away by the airs and graces of a woman who ought to know better! You're clear-sighted, I will say. I have been uneasy—that is, not quite comfortable—to see how that woman calls 'Norman' here and 'Norman' there, as if he were a brother in the house. My word! but she wouldn't find a brother to wait on her like that. It's just all vanity, and it will end in vexation of spirit. Then Norman will come to his right mind. She was always upsetting and greedy to be 'made' of. A busy man like Mr. Crichton hasn't the time to be waiting on her, and he working from morn till night to wrap her up in luxury, though he sees clear enough she's weak and idle. He said as much to me to-day. Eh! but I'm sorry for yon man! You wait a bit, my lamb"—trying a touch of pathos—"my laddie will be sick of her and her unlawful nonsense (the woman is more weak than wicked), and Norman, I *know*, was growing right fond of you, my bonnie bird! You know it's the wish of my heart to call you my daughter, and you must help me to save him—you must, Jess, my dearie!"

"I don't deny I could be fond of Norman if I thought he cared for me, but I am not going to throw myself at any man's head. But, Mrs. Adair"—with a sudden change in her voice—"we must win him back, or—or I'll die! and there's the truth—there's no use trying to hide it!"

"Never you fear, we'll do that. If I have to go to bed and sham sick, I'll tear him away from that out-of-the-world place."

"Oh, I could not ask you to do such a thing. But we'll get up this party I thought of to-day, and say dad wants his help. He'll come then—and when he does come, Mrs. Adair, you must speak to him very seriously."

"No, no, my lambie, that would never do. I'll tell you who I'll speak to—Mrs. Crichton—that will put a stop to their brother and sister-hood. She is afraid of Crichton—real downright afraid. There's conscience, my dear! for why should she be afraid of such a frank, kindly, well-disposed man like that? Then she'll just give Norman his 'lave.' I give her the credit of being decent enough not to tell him his mother had been obliged to lay the truth before her. She is too afraid of her husband to risk rousing his suspicions, so she'll just hold her

tongue. Norman, he'll think her changeable and ungrateful, for it's my belief that he has lavished sums on her and on that cross-grained sister of hers. He'll be wounded and offended, and leave her, to seek comfort with a real, good, sensible, handsome girlie—and the Lord's blessing will be upon our work !”

“Eh, Mrs. Adair, but you are a far-seeing, deep-thinking woman. I'll just do as you advise, and as you are right in one way, so you may be in another. I can't help thinking that Norman was a wee taken with me. I mind the night we went to see ‘Caste.’ He said, with a sort of look I cannot describe, ‘He (meaning the hero) did quite right. If I only thought the woman I loved loved me, neither rank nor riches, nor anything else should keep us apart. Are you of my opinion, Miss Ogilvie?’ which was rather strong, you know. He also mentioned that he did not like dark-haired women. Another time—but oh, Mrs. Adair”—breaking off suddenly—“do have a care of Effie! She is just foolish about Mrs. Crichton ; she would go on by the hour talking of her soft voice and sympathetic ways, and I don't know what all, and Norman used to listen as if it was the sweetest music.

That was what first put thoughts into my head that have made me downright miserable."

"Then you must cheer up. I'll put an end to all this *perneecious* nonsense. Why, you are not going away, my lambie?"

"Well, yes, I must. I want to bring the general round to my plans. Of course I'll do it, but I want to do it well, and when that's settled I'll send Norman his invitation. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Adair," pinning on her hat. "I think if we work together all will go well." She kissed her future mother-in-law and departed.

"God grant it may," thought Mrs. Adair. "But my part in the business is not just smooth walking. I'll have a stiff half hour with Gwen, she always had a ready tongue. I wonder how it is she hasn't mastered Crichton, with her advantages she ought to have him under her thumb. It's just weakness—and conscience."

"Mother dear, there's a nice cup of tea and a bit scone waiting us in the dining-room. What's gone with Jess?"

"Gone home to talk the general over to give this dinner."

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry—she just havers

havers all the time. I never have a chance of speaking a word—not that I'd mind it, if it was interesting, but it's all about herself—every word—what she says and does, and wears, and intends to wear, and the fine speeches all the young men—and for that matter, the old ones too——”

“Don't you be ill-natured. All young people talk about themselves—you do too. I know I used to be fairly weary when you were taken up with that fiddler fellow.”

‘It's not everyone,” returned Effie, reflectively, “that has such manners as Mrs. Crichton. She listens so kindly to every word you say and never mentions anything belonging to herself, except her children now and again.”

“Well, now, just eat up your bit o' scone, and let me have forty winks before the bell rings for church. Though it's a cold evening I think I'll try and go, for I'm afraid this has been no like a peaceful Sawbath.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mrs. Crichton had rarely got through a visit from her husband so successfully. He was amused, well fed, and subtly flattered. The noisy humour and slapdash jokes of Adair's friend suited him exactly,

while Mrs. Crichton was not made too much of. Lodging and living were not quite so costly as he anticipated, and he was quite gracious to his wife.

Having seen Crichton off to London, Adair spent the rest of the day examining the latest wonder in the shape of an ironclad, which was to be launched the following week. The sight stirred his professional ambition, and he thought with deep dissatisfaction of the life that lay before him. If Gwendoline were his wife, safely moored under his protection, he felt he could have left her for a time, and then there are many naval stations where she could have joined him ; but, situated as she was he could never know a moment's peace were he out of reach, while his devotion was only a source of danger to her. At last he resolved to reflect and battle with himself no more, but let himself drift wherever the current of fate took him.

At night he caught the mail train to Plymouth and spent a day rambling about, calling on one or two acquaintances, and again flying back by night to the haven where he would be. He saw with a pang that no small degree of alarm was mingled with the pleasure Mrs. Crichton showed at his unexpected return.

"What a short visit you have paid!" she exclaimed.

"I saw all I wanted, and the man I particularly wanted to see was away. I have only looked in on my way to town. I shall go up on Saturday, and I am engaged to dinner to-morrow, so, without being too intrusive, I think I *might* spend Friday in this enchanted valley?"

"I am sure you might," she returned, smiling. "Do not think me unkind and inhospitable, Norman."

"I think you—all I have ever thought you! Friday then!—and if fine we'll drive over to Carisbrooke and take the youngsters."

"That will be charming. It is too tempting to refuse."

"Why should you refuse? It will be nearly at the end of your holiday, and remember, you have the dreary stay-at-home winter before you. Let us gather the roses while we may."

"Ah, yes! I have a great dread of London this winter. I wish we could stay here—but that is not to be thought of——"

"Take my advice, do not look forward. It is often true wisdom to live from day to day."

Friday was friendly, and lent sunshine to the expedition which Adair had planned, and Mrs. Crichton described to her sister—"It was a delightful day." But on Saturday afternoon Adair again presented himself, putting up for the night at the neighbouring inn, and accompanying Mrs. Crichton and her little girl to church. Divining her uneasiness at these constant visits, he took leave of her early in the afternoon, declaring his intention not to come again until he was invited.

"I am going north to Galloway in a few days," he added. "I want to have a look at the place I think of buying. I have been there, but I want to inspect it thoroughly."

"You certainly ought, Norman. Is there any shooting? It might be an improvement on life in London, which must be very dreary to a man like you."

Adair looked up and met her eyes as she finished speaking. His companion flushed up vividly, and then grew pale, for she trembled to think of the potent reason which kept him there. Where was she drifting? She must lay fast hold of principle—of common sense.

"Oh, I shall manage between the two," said



Adair, turning his eyes upon the fire. "When shall you come back?"

"On Friday or Saturday next."

"I shall probably be in Scotland by that time."

Mrs. Crichton kept silence.

"Well, good-bye," he resumed. "I am not sure what I shall do. If I go to town on Monday I shall send you a line. Crichton is not coming down?"

"No, I think not. Good-bye! Yes—do let me know something of your movements."

"I shall never leave you without my address, you may be sure! As soon as I am in town I will call on Miss Hill."

"Thank you so much. That will indeed be doing her and me a favour."

"Till we meet again then——" a long hand pressure, a long look into her eyes, and he was gone!

"He will be more prudent in London," thought Mrs. Crichton, as she took up one of the books he had left with her.

"It is for me to save him from this temporary insanity," she thought, as she drew her chair to the fire, and laid her book open on her knee. "It can only be temporary. I must help him. If I do not keep my senses, what is to become of us all? Oh!

if only this Ogilvie girl was suited to him—could attract him, he would soon forget all but a kindly wish to befriend me. I wish—oh, no! I do *not* wish him to love her! God forgive me! I ought to wish it. If he did love anyone else, how could I endure the blank desolation of my life now I know what help and sympathy are? Yet I must be strong and of a good courage.”

She forced herself to attend to the page before her, and gradually the storm of emotion which had swept over her subsided, and good resolutions soothed her soul,

Monday's post brought her no letters, but soon after her early dinner, the children having gone out with the nurse for a brief walk before evening began to close, Adair entered.

Mrs. Crichton, feeling weary and depressed, had lain down on the sofa with a periodical in her hand, but merely as an excuse for keeping still.

“Good God, Gwen! You are not ill!” cried Adair in sincere alarm. He had never found her in such a position before.

“Ill! Oh no, not at all, I am only suffering from a fit of laziness.” She was on her feet in a moment.

“But you, Norman? What brings you here?”

He laughed—a happy laugh—it was so delightful to be with her alone, come what might afterwards. “I thought I should get a wiggling for coming so soon again. I had an invitation this morning which I want to show you.”

It must be something very remarkable to come all this way about it.”

“Here it is,” he said, taking an envelope with a huge and very intricate monogram in gold upon it. “Read,” he added, and threw himself into an arm-chair to await that process.

“What a bold, clear hand,” observed Mrs Crichton, who read as follows : “My dear Norman”—Norman was lightly scratched out, and “Mr. Adair” substituted. “After many days of expectation—indeed, on your mother’s part, of despair—we have at last got on your tracks, thanks to Mr. Crichton, whom I met at Mrs. Adair’s this afternoon. He gave a touching picture of the sort of pastoral idyllic life you are now leading, and from which, like a wicked worldling as I am, I want to tear you. You must know that my dear good papa wishes to celebrate my natal day by feeding our friends and neighbours at the Criterion, and we are both anxious, not only that you should grace

the festivity with your presence, but that you would be so kind as to come up to town and help us to organise the concern. The event we are to celebrate really took place on the 25th, but we fear that would oblige us to give too short notice, so think of fixing the dinner for the 30th. Do come over and help us. Mr. Crichton has already promised to join us. If Mrs. Crichton is to be got at (and if any one knows her movements you will), do persuade her to grace the banquet with her presence. I enclose a card. Now don't waste time writing, but *come* at once, take your scolding, and be reconciled to yours truly,

"JESSIE OGILVIE.

"P.S.—*Do* come! We really want you."

Mrs. Crichton put down the letter without speaking.

"Well! what do you say to that eloquent epistle?" asked Norman. "Must I go?"

"That depends on what you wish to do. Of course you may be engaged on business to go to Scotland. But it will be more friendly to go." She began to re-read the letter with a slight smile. "I should have thought," she said, "that the simplest

way would have been to send my card through Mr. Crichton."

"Well, yes ; I suppose so. But will you come?"

"I am not at all sure. I would rather not, and I may not be in town. At any rate I will send my reply through Mr. Crichton. But, Norman, I fancy it will please them all if you go, and *dis*please them a good deal if you stay away. What do you think yourself?"

Norman thought a moment. Mrs. Crichton's tone suggested aspects of the letter which he had not at first perceived. It flashed upon him that if Miss Ogilvie fancied herself neglected for Mrs. Crichton's sake it would be a decided complication of the present not too simple state of affairs, and moreover bring the keenly observant eye of the fair Jess upon him, so after a moment's reflection Adair replied :

"I had better go. It's rather a bore, but it will please my mother, and anyhow, I'll return to town to-night and catch my womenkind at breakfast to-morrow."

"I think it is the best thing you can do."

"Very good ! Won't you give me a cup of tea ? Then I'll be off and catch the 9.30 up train at Portsmouth."

Mrs. Crichton rang and ordered tea, then handing him back his letter, observed, "Miss Ogilvie's epistle seems to give me a clearer idea of her than any descriptions!"

"Yes, doesn't it?"

A quiet confidential hour soon passed, and Adair took leave.

"Our next meeting will be under different conditions," he said. "I shall always think of Ventnor as a glimpse of Paradise. Good bye. God be with you."

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## CHAPTER XII.

ADAIR'S prompt obedience to her summons put Miss Ogilvie in high good humour with herself and him. Moreover, the acceptances far outnumbered the refusals she received. To the poor general it was a time of trial. The hospitable and ostentatious side of him warred against his natural and acquired penuriousness. The weighty influence of his daughter, however, turned the scale for once in favour of extravagance, and a very fine repast was planned regardless of expense, every item of which was referred to Adair, who found himself almost perpetually at General Ogilvie's abode, and in

Jess's company. This he found rather too much of a good thing. His mother received him as if he had been a prodigal, and she a forgiving parent ; a treatment under which his good temper gave way, and he made some sharp replies, upon which his mother shook her head and said he had not been in edifying company. In Effie, however, he found a kindly and sympathetic friend. She seemed stronger too, physically and mentally.

"I think everything is pretty well fixed up now," exclaimed Jess Ogilvie, one evening some two or three days before the birthday. "I had a note from Mr. Crichton, in which he says his wife had just returned to town, and would be very happy to accompany him on Thursday. I think she must be rather stuck-up not to have answered the invitation I sent through you?"

"These are niceties of etiquette of which I am no judge," said Adair, indifferently.

"If you knew Mrs. Crichton," observed Effie, emphatically, "you would never accuse her of being stuck-up. She is so unassuming and well-bred."

"It's more than her sister is," exclaimed Miss Ogilvie, abruptly. "I should be glad enough to go and see her, poor old bodie, but she is so proud

and contemptuous that I don't think she likes it; one would think it was a condescension to speak to you."

"I'm sure you are longing for a weed, general," exclaimed Adair. "Come into the next room, my mother will excuse us, and I have a notion some Scotch whiskey is to be found thereabouts." He was resolved not to be drawn into any discussion on the subject of Crichton and Co.

"Oh, my dear boy, I could not think of annoying Mrs. Adair with these barrack-room habits."

"Oh, don't distress yourself. I have broken her into these ways. She is far too kind-hearted to grudge us poor devils our bit of comfort."

"I'm sure it does not say much for the superiority of man's nature, if smoking is the one comfort in his life," cried Miss Ogilvie, who was annoyed by Adair's readiness to prefer her father's society to hers.

"Oh, I never pretended to superiority of any kind. I am just an ordinary tobacco-loving, eating, drinking, easy-going sailor. Don't attempt to idealise me," said Adair, laughing.

"Are you so conceited as to suppose I try?"

"The weakness of man is unfathomable," returned Adair, as he closed the door.



"Young men are not what they used to be in my day," remarked the hostess, who was busy with some elaborate crochet, intended to adorn some future "home."

"I daresay your grandmother said the same thing, Mrs. Adair; come, Effie, do put down that book, it makes me ill to see you read—read—read, and take no interest in anything; get paper and pencil, dearie, and let us see how we'll send in the animals two by two; 'The Elephant and the Kangaroo.'"

"It was two and two of the same kind, Jess."

"What! don't you know the St. Andrew's student song, Effie?"

The occupation proved rather absorbing, necessitating many visits to the smokers, to ask counsel and assistance.

"I must not go in with Mr. Adair," said Jess. "I must go in with old Major-General Elliott; he is rather a disagreeable, cynical old carle, but he will be on his best behaviour, considering it will be my birthday."

Miss Ogilvie's dear friends were not sorry when the day arrived, for she never let them escape a single detail, and the interest was worn a little

thin. All went well apparently, and only one guest failed, a certain Admiral Jenkins, who, at the last moment, telegraphed that he was held fast by gout. This was bad enough, but as the men were in excess of the lady guests, no great harm would have been done, had not that "stupid, interfering papa," as Miss Ogilvie called the general in her heart, called out, "Ah, Mrs. Crichton, your partner has not come to the colours! Our friend, the admiral, is worsted by his enemy, the gout; but you shall have an effective substitute. Here, Adair, you must take in Mrs. Crichton—vice Jenkins—invalided." This in a tone of self-satisfaction, as if he had proved himself a man of infinite tact.

Mrs. Crichton looked unusually pale, and her eyes had the watchful, guarded expression it always pained Adair to see. She wore the same dress of black silk and lace which he had first observed at Mrs. Grey's dinner party, now more than nine months ago. Was she any better off or happier than at that distressful period? Yes; thank God! he had been able in one way to improve her position.

"Were I superstitious," he said, as he offered her

his arm, "I should immediately invest in some doubtful company. I must be in a vein of luck! I never dreamed of being your cavalier. How's a' wi' ye? There is such a Scotch atmosphere about this gathering, that I feel myself falling into or rising up to the broadest dialect."

"You always have a touch of the accent, Norman, but I am well accustomed to that ; indeed, I like it."

"That is right ; but you have not answered my question. How are you ?"

"Oh, well, quite well !"

"Then you do not look it."

"Thank you for the pretty speech. I am a little tired, perhaps, for I have stood about all day regulating the disorders of the last month, and tightening the reins of discipline."

Here the slight fuss of sitting down to table, and the distribution of soup, interrupted conversation.

"How smart everyone is," said Mrs. Crichton, presently, looking round ; "only white—or rose—or blue. I feel myself a dark spot on all this brightness, almost as bad as a skeleton at the feast."

"If you go on growing so thin, you will be some day." This with a glance of sympathy and regret.

"Really, Norman, the complimentary turn of your phrases is overpowering."

"Do you need complimentary phrases from me?"

"No; nor from any one. Is it not curious that Mr. Crichton has a much truer instinct about clothes than I have? He said I ought to have worn white to-day, but this garment came to hand first, and as usual I did not think."

"It is not for me to give an opinion, but I prefer your present costume to any other."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You wore it at the Greys', the first time I met you. Don't you remember, last spring?"

"I can never forget meeting you, Norman," gently and gravely, "but I am sure I forgot what I had on."

Here an old cavalry colonel, who was on her other side, put in his claim for attention, and it was some time before Adair had his innings.

The dinner was long, but by no means dull—every one talked abundantly—and champagne kept their spirits in an effervescent condition. Adair had, from his place, a very good view of Crichton, who had taken in a gorgeous dowager,

Lady Scudamore, who was heavily hung with diamonds, the fruits of a long residence in India, as the wife of a highly-placed civil servant. "He looked awfully glum when he came in," mused Adair. "I fancy he has been bullying her, before they started. He's getting mollified now, between the champagne—the diamonds—and the distinguished company! I think he loves a title, though he piques himself on being a plain citizen. My God! What a fate! that *she* should have such a scoundrelly partner."

To Adair there was, at present, but one "she" in the universe.

"What a military gathering," said Mrs. Crichton, turning to Adair at last. "What nice-looking, well set-up old gentlemen, and smart young ones. I fancy I should like military society, if I knew it."

"I am not so sure. I fancy it is rather narrow, and sailors too, though they are such wanderers; it is the tendency of a 'service' to keep the members more or less in irons."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Miss Ogilvie's right-hand neighbour, rising tall and gaunt; "it is my pleasing duty to call on you to fill your glasses to the toast of the evening"—and he pro-

ceeded to pronounce a glowing eulogium on the character, the accomplishments, the intellect and the charms of Miss Ogilvie (at this she hid her face with her fan), calling on the company to drink to her prosperity, happiness, and "many happy returns of the day——" Loud applause, and rapping of the table ; while this continued, Jess, who was most becomingly arrayed in white and gold, shot a glance, reproachful, tender, appealing—at Adair ; this he returned, by holding his glass towards her, and then drank off the contents.

Then General Ogilvie returned thanks for his daughter in a somewhat "staccato " style, and proposed the health of the guests. Then the contagion of speechifying spread, till finally the Rev. Dugald McNab, minister of Pitandeil, well known for his eloquence and polemic powers, on the strength of having admitted the charming "young leddy," in whose honour they were assembled that evening, into our venerated kirk, pronounced a sort of benediction on the whole proceeding, an address curiously compounded of Scripture texts, and humorous well-told stories, which brought the festivities to an end.

As there was no drawing-room in which to

torture the guests with "a little music," and the sitting had been prolonged considerably, the party broke up, and after standing about in groups, exchanging a few remarks, and taking leave in flattering terms of the heroine of the day, they sought their carriages, and departed.

"I must thank you for a very pleasant and interesting evening," said Mrs. Crichton, as she bid General Ogilvie and his daughter good-night. "Have you any 'at home' day, Miss Ogilvie? as I hope to have the pleasure of calling on you—if you will allow me."

"Thank you," returned the young lady—who seemed a good deal fatigued. "I am generally to be found at tea-time, but I have no special day."

Mrs. Crichton passed on to Mrs. Adair, who enquired for her children with rather stiff civility. "I shall come and see you as soon as I possibly can," said Mrs. Crichton, "but, besides being rather busy on returning home, my sister is suffering a good deal just now, and I try to be with her as much as possible."

"Eh! that is hard both on you and Mr. Crichton," said Mrs. Adair grimly, "but still worse for herself. Well, good night. I hope to see

you soon. Norman, will you find Mr. Crichton, and the carriage has been announced."

"He has disappeared with that fascinating female, Lady Scudamore. Come, I will take care of you." She took his arm, and went away to the stair. "You had better leave Crichton to me," said Adair. "He can finish the evening more satisfactorily than in 'fighting his battles o'er again.' We'll go to the Alhambra. There's a splendid ballet there, quite his style. You are pretty well done, I can see that. You want a good night's rest woefully, I see."

"But are you sure George wants to go with you? He may be vexed if I do not wait for him."

"Do not be afraid. I have already suggested my plan, and he seemed to take to it. I'll tell him it was all my fault."

"I am, indeed, woefully tired—and shall be so glad to get to rest. It was an amusing dinner—but Miss Ogilvie does not look very happy or elated. You must bid her a kind good-night, Norman."

"Do you want me to give a false impression?"

"No; Heaven forbid——"

"Mrs. Crichton's carriage."



"Coming out ! "

"Ah—good night, Norman."

"One moment, Mrs. Crichton ; you say Miss Hill has been suffering greatly. If I call to-morrow afternoon, shall I see her ? "

"Yes ; I am sure she will be pleased to see you."

"All right—about four, then. Good-night."

Mrs. Crichton leant back in her brougham rather dazed with fatigue, with the noise and glare of the dinner. Norman was certainly her good angel ; but she must not lean upon him. She had no right to appropriate his help. She could not forget the look Miss Ogilvie had given Adair when her health was drunk. "I am afraid she is fond of him ! and I do not think she is a woman who would suit him ! Yet for aught I know she may be worthy of all love. I do hate to see anyone suffer ! I wish I could persuade Norman to be wise—to take up his life and leave me to my fate ! He can do very little good. He can do himself infinite harm. And it is all my fault. Had I not been a weak, miserable coward I should not have asked him for that money, to shelter me from a storm which must have passed over. Had I not been a contemptible poltroon I should have stood up for what is right

and just, then I never would have fallen so low. Why, I am not worthy of having charge of my own children ! It was my appeal to him that roused Norman's sympathies so strongly, and drew him to me ; and I—I will urge him to go away, though God only knows what darkness—darkness that may be felt—will settle down upon me when he is gone. He must never discover this." She pressed her handkerchief tightly against her eyes in a vain effort to stem the tears which would come.

"Missis's eyes were red with crying when I was helping her off with her dress," said Miss Housemaid to Mrs. Cook, when she prepared to go to bed in their common apartment.

"Was his lordship raging then?" asked Cook, sleepily.

"No ; that's what puzzled me. He was not there at all."

"That didn't make her cry, I'll be bound !"

"I don't suppose it did. But she said to me : 'Susan, do not bolt the door, nor put up the chain ; I left your master with Mr. Adair, and he will not be home just yet.'"

"Come to your bed, Susan. It would be better for 'our master' if he went out on the prowl, like

his fellows, instead of rampaging at home and upsetting us all."

When Adair returned to the dining-room no one was left but the givers of the feast, Mrs. Adair, Effie, the Minister of Pitandeil, and a slim Honourable MacSomething who had paid the heroine of the evening very marked attention.

"No chance of a word with you before, Miss Ogilvie—you were so surrounded. Now, my very best wishes for all the happiness you deserve and a balance over, if that be possible," said Adair. He held out his hand, and she put hers in it.

"Thank you," she said, a little unsteadily. "And thank you too for this lovely bracelet!" holding out her arm, on which sparkled a rich rope of flexible gold studded with rubies and diamonds. "It is the most charming present I have had, and I'll always wear it in your honour, Norman."

"Ah, that will be an honour indeed," he returned, gallantly.

"Norman, we are all going back to my rooms to take a cup of tea before going to bed. You'll come too, won't you?"

"Very sorry, mother, but I promised Crichton to look in at the ballet they are giving at the Alham-

bra. We will be just in time for the grand scene. Ah! there is Crichton."

"Why didn't he go home with his wife?" asked Mrs. Adair, querulously—"and what an hour to be going to a place of entertainment!"

"One cannot settle down at once to sleep after the excitement of an evening like this," returned Adair, laughing, and glancing at Miss Ogilvie.

She made no reply, but, turning to the Honourable Mac, asked:

"Wouldn't you like a cup of tea? I am sure my friend, Mrs. Adair, would be pleased if you would join us," and she waved her fan towards that lady.

"Yes, indeed, very pleased," said Mrs. Adair, dolorously.

Here Mr. Crichton came up. "Well, general, you have given us a delightful evening; did it in first-rate style too."

"If we are to see anything of the ballet, Crichton, we had better be going. I saw Mrs. Crichton into her carriage—she was very tired—and if you don't go home till morning she'll be none the wiser."

"You are a bad boy, Adair, to be leading the sober head of a family into downward paths. Good night, general. All good wishes, Miss Ogilvie." With

a comprehensive bow Adair took leave of the group, and, passing his arm through Crichton's, they left the room.

"I suppose there is nothing to wait for?" said Jess. "Is the carriage here?"

"Has been waiting some time," replied the general.

"Come, then, Mrs. Adair, I'm just longing for a cup of your good tea. Papa, you and Mr. Macduff can come in a hansom."

She had thrown off her look of fatigue, and her eyes sparkled—not joyously—altogether a new spirit seemed to have entered into her. She talked with a sort of excited volubility, and flirted outrageously with her new admirer, keeping her father and hostess up cruelly late.

"Thank the Lord, they're gone!" said Mrs. Adair to her daughter, with a soft moan, later on. "What a heap of money the general must have spent this night on a feckless sort of ploy. Isn't Norman enough to vex a saint, going off to such places, and dragging that decent man with him?"

"Eh, mother. Where's the harm?"

"It would be better and wiser, and more civil, if he came back with his entertainers, instead of

letting that long-legged laddie Macduff have it all his own way. I saw the tears in Jessie's een when he walked off, and the reason she laughed and chattered and made so much noise was to keep from having a good fit of crying. Go to your bed this minute, Effie, you are coughing again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Adair chose to consider that Mrs. Crichton had made an appointment to meet him at her sister's, and was unreasonably annoyed to find that she had paid her visit early; because, indeed, she had to pay a distant formal call at a considerable distance that afternoon. All to please that whimsical brute, Crichton, who wanted her to cultivate the dull, purse-proud wife of a city magnate.

Nevertheless, he forced himself to be cheerful and conversational with the poor invalid, who was unfeignedly glad to see him. Before long, however, he found himself listening with deepest interest to her remarks about her sister.

"I cannot quite make her out," said Miss Hill. "I gather that Crichton is less objectionable of late. Of course, Gwen never complains of him. Never, indeed, mentions his name. Still there are indications I have learned to read. But

she is looking ill—ill and distressed. I don't think she is in any trouble—especial trouble—yet she is frightfully depressed—do *you* know if anything is wrong ? ”

Adair shook his head. “ I do not ! Like yourself, I fancied things were better. Crichton seemed in an amiable mood towards the end of the evening, last night—but he was very variable.”

“ Gwen has been very weak—reprehensibly weak—I often tell her so—and it has astonished me. In some directions (I used to think in all) she is strong ; she is very intelligent—greatly in advance of her husband in every way. Why then has he enslaved her in this disgraceful manner ? ”

“ I think I understand,” said Adair, thoughtfully, “ she is impressionable ; she imagined she returned Crichton's passion (he does not know what love is), because she was grateful to him (as if any one deserved gratitude for loving *her* !) and believed he was what he seemed, in the glamour his temporary passion for her threw over him. Then, when he began to find fault, the loyalty of her nature sent her to seek for the reason in her own conduct—her own failures—instead of at once

assuming the defensive—and governing him on the ‘You’re another’ system. Thus she lost her grip of the lower animal, and never could get it again. My God! To think of a man who called her ‘wife’—thinking of her, treating her as a mere upper servant—as you know he does!” and Adair began to pace to and fro in speechless indignation.

Miss Hill looked at him keenly.

“I wish you would not perambulate the room, Norman—it fidgets me.” He sat down immediately. “It seems to me,” resumed Miss Hill, “that romance rarely survives marriage.”

“Perhaps not—if the wife or husband are common-place. But, with a creature like Gwen——”

“She seems rather an ideal to you. Now if I were you I should not think of her in that light, it would be wiser not, Norman. It would be better to put her out of your mind and look for a fresh ideal, who is untrammelled, and whom you could idealise *and* idolise till death did you part!”

“What do you mean?” cried Adair, flushing a dark red.

“Don’t think I mean to say you are not an upright, honest gentleman, only do not let yourself



drift into pain or trouble—enough will seek you——”

Here the noise of childish voices made itself heard, and enter Georgie, his sister, and baby.

Chatter and play ensued, till Nurse decided that Miss Hill had had enough, when Norman took his leave with the youngsters, and walked with them to their home. Mrs. Crichton was still absent, so Norman walked to his club across the Park, battling with an unpleasant impression that he had got into a wrong track, and that some unpleasant crisis was at hand.

“I am growing an old woman,” he said to himself. “Why should such childish presentiments disturb me? I harm no one, and if I choose to endure occasional torture for the sake of the sweetness that thrills through it, that is my affair. Gwen, thank God! has no heart to spare from her children. If she had room for me in it—if she had—but that is not to be thought of.”

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## CHAPTER XIII.

THE birthday festival, though highly approved by the guests, was by no means successful in Mrs. Adair's or Jess Ogilvie's eyes.

The day following it that young lady kept her bed. She had, she said, a nervous headache, so her father reported to Mrs. Adair.

"Excitement, I suppose," said the veteran. "But in all her days I never remember my girlie complain of a headache before, and as to excitement, why, no amount of it would bowl her over."

"I'm sure it was a beautiful entertainment, and everybody was well pleased."

"Yes, they did the thing very well, I must say. Perhaps, Mrs. Adair, if you are going out you would be good enough to call on Jess, she said she would be glad to see you."

"Yes, General Ogilvie, I'll do that gladly."

Ogilvie enquired for Effie and went away.

"I shall go out after lunch, my dear!" said Mrs. Adair to her daughter. "The general has just been

here and says Jess wants to see me. *He* has gone off to pay the bill, he said. It will be a pull, I have no doubt."

"Oh, mother, Jessie told me she had determined to pay half of it. You know she came of age yesterday, though she did not care that people should know she was more than twenty."

"Anyhow, she is poorly and in bed, so I am going round to see her. What are you going to do, my dearie?"

"I'm sure I don't know, mother. I think I'd like to go and see Mrs. Crichton."

"Well—no—I don't want you to go there. I must go and call to-morrow or next day myself. Just go and call on Annie McTavish, or go over to Whiteley's and take Susan with you."

"Perhaps I may——"

When Mrs. Adair reached General Ogilvie's abode, she was almost immediately shown up to Jess's darkened room.

"Well, my dear, I am very vexed to see you here, after being the life of your party last night."

"Life! I'm sure it did not leave much life in me! I wish I had never given the horrid thing, or troubled my father about it."

"It was all very flattering, and I never saw you look better."

"Much good that did me."

Mrs. Adair felt puzzled, and waited rather nervously for what was coming.

"Have you seen Norman yet?"

"Not this morning."

"I don't expect you did. I must say it was not very kind or friendly of him to walk off with Mr. Crichton, a man he doesn't like a bit, instead of coming home with us to talk over things. He had been so helpful, and interested in all the preparations, that I thought—oh!—what matter what I thought?—nothing matters much to him. But that Mrs. Crichton. The way they went on was shameful."

"Indeed then, Jess, I did not see anything shameful in their conduct."

"Didn't you? You sat at the same side of the table, and could not see either of them. I was at the top, and saw a good deal. I tell you, Norman never turned his face from her the whole of dinner except just when my health was drunk. He talked and talked, and was so animated and listened to everything she said, as if pearls and diamonds were

dropping from her lips. She was quiet enough, and seemed tired of everything. How anyone can call her handsome, I *cannot* understand. She is so white and inanimate, and even old-looking for her years. You say she is younger than Norman? Oh, I am sick of it all, and my head is so bad——” burying her face in the pillow.

“I am very troubled, my dear, to see you suffering. But I do think you exaggerate. It's not right, of course, but it's just a passing folly with Norman. I mean she is a designing woman, I'm afraid, but there's nothing much to——”

“Perhaps not, and all I hope is that Mr. Crichton may continue the blind bat he is, and that Norman may continue to succeed in throwing dust in his eyes, for if he does not, Crichton will be a dangerous man. I believe he would do anything desperate if he thought his wife deceived him. *You* would not like your son to come to an untimely end!”

“My patience, Jess, this is wild talk!”

“No, it's common sense; you'll be sorry if you don't put a stop to it. It is no affair of mine, however. Norman may do what he likes for me.

There are other men in the world, and of higher rank, too, who might prefer me to a sickly married woman! Not that I shall ever forget *your* kindness, dear Mrs. Adair! You know how much attention Norman showed me while that woman was shut up with her sick child! But from the time she went out of town he has thrown us all over! Even Mr. Macduff asked me who that rather *distinguée* woman was, that Adair was so taken up with? So I have done with him. Don't suppose I am going to fret! I am ill and full of pain to-day, but to-morrow I will defy anyone to say I am wearing the willow."

"Listen to me, Jess," said Mrs. Adair, impressively. "Let me speak reason to you. You are a high-spirited, loyal-hearted woman, and too young to make allowances for our poor fallen nature, but I cannot let my poor dear lose his best chance of happiness for want of a little help, not altogether for his sake either, but because from my heart I believe he would make you a better, pleasanter husband than any honourable among them. Give me a week to see what I can do. Don't cast him behind you just yet—don't gibe or scoff at him—better not see him at all for a

week or so—and we'll see how things may turn out."

"It's no great matter whether I see him or not. But I'll be guided by you, Mrs. Adair. Now I will try to sleep."

"Do, my bairn, and then amuse yourself. There's something funny being played at the Strand Theatre. You and Effie and the general had better go and see it, so good-bye till to-morrow or next day."

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Mrs. Adair's wrath was deep and strong. She saw with Miss Ogilvie's eyes, and heard with her ears. Norman had entered on the way which leadeth to destruction, and she, his mother, was bound to preserve him. Nor could she devise a better plan than that which had already suggested itself to her mind. She would go to the root of the matter and attack Mrs. Crichton. In truth she shrank from the undertaking. It was, however, a shade less formidable than opening the batteries on Norman, who would be very angry and stern. She had great hopes that her interference might never come to his ears.

The following day was bright and mild, so Mrs.

Adair started immediately after luncheon, taking an omnibus for part of the way, and then ensconcing herself in a four-wheeler to escape recognition.

"If she is out it will be provoking and a clear loss of one and twopence. I'll walk *back* any-way."

Mrs. Crichton was at home and alone, however, and Mrs. Adair was shown into the pretty, comfortable morning room where Gwen was at her writing-table occupied with sundry little books.

"This is very kind of you," she exclaimed, rising to meet her visitor. "I was thinking of calling on you late this afternoon, when I had finished my accounts and letters."

"I hope I am not interrupting you, Mrs. Crichton?"

"A very pleasant interruption! How is your daughter?"

"Not quite so well. She has her cough again. If it continues I am afraid we must go away to the south again."

A few commonplace sentences were exchanged, then Mrs. Crichton remarked: "Had you been a



quarter of an hour sooner you would have met your son. He called very kindly to say he had a box to-morrow at the Princess's for the fairy piece they are playing there, 'Little Miss Muffet.' It is very pretty. He wants to take the children and myself. He left me to see his sister and engage her to be of the party."

Mrs. Adair sat up very straight as she thought :  
"Taking Effie as a screen, indeed !"

"Well, he will not find her, I'm thinking. She had just gone round to see her friend, Miss Ogilvie, who is not very well after her birthday dinner."

"Indeed ! I am very sorry to hear it. It was very successful."

"It seemed so." A pause. Mrs. Adair found her nerves scarcely equal to the attack she meditated on the gentle, well-bred woman sitting opposite.

"I'll do it on the friendly tack," she resolved.  
"And how is Mr. Crichton ?"

"Very well indeed."

"I was a wee vexed with him for carrying off my boy after the dinner, when I wanted him to come home with my guests to tea."

"My dear Mrs. Adair! I think it was your son who carried off my husband."

"Anyway—it put me out! Now I wonder if I might venture to offer you a little word of advice in a matter that might strike a looker-on, and yet not be much noticed by the actors in it?"

"Anything you choose to say shall have my best attention, Mrs. Adair."

"Ahem!" A pause. "Then, my dear, don't you think that friends and neighbours may notice that my boy is ever and always in and out of your house? That he is more like a father to your children than their own? That, in short, even a brother would be less at your orders than he is? I daresay you are both innocent of evil, but it hasn't a good appearance, and our hearts being desperately wicked we never know where they may lead us, so it is wiser and more high-minded to avoid even the appearance of evil. I trust then, my dear young friend, you will not encourage my son to hang round you, but let him follow his mother's counsels and take a sweet, bonnie lassie, with a good *tocher*, and settle down to be a good man, a useful citizen, and—a—a——" she paused, run aground for a concluding sentence.

Mrs. Crichton, who had flushed up and then grown white, smiled faintly, and then answered with great composure:

"You surprise me very much! I might quote the old motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, but that never yet stopped ill-natured suspicion. Still, if Norman's intimacy with Mr. Crichton, his frequent presence in the house as my husband's special guest, his high character, my own purely domestic life, are not guarantees of honourable friendship, we had better adopt Eastern habits, forbid all acquaintanceship between the sexes, and descend into the abyss of polygamy at once."

"I am sorry you take what was well meant in a bad spirit, Mrs. Crichton. It is, I feel, my duty to warn you, and not let you drift unwarned into—into mischief. Let me add that, should his jealousy be roused, it would be ill talking with your husband! Now I'll say no more. Your own good sense will guide you now I have opened your eyes."

"You certainly have, Mrs. Adair! But I am sure your motives are the best. However, my pleasant friendship with your son is over. Never-

theless, he may occasionally be within our gates. I suppose you do not expect me to repeat this conversation to Mr. Crichton, and if I do not, he is sure to invite Norman to the house, and I cannot refuse to receive him. I must explain something to your son."

"Lord sake, Mrs. Crichton, do not betray me! I'm sure Norman would be fearfully angry—and quarrel with me—and—and—You'll promise to keep my visit secret?"

"I will, if you wish it, though I should prefer telling the whole story," said Mrs. Crichton, rising.

Her visitor felt herself dismissed, and also that she had made a blunder.

"You'll not bear enmity because I dared to speak the truth to you, I hope?" said Mrs. Adair uneasily. "You see, I felt it my duty."

"No, I shall not, but I regret that you so misunderstand your son."

"Are you sure you understand him any better?"

"At any rate, I suppose you believe in your own penetration, and believe that your own impressions must be true."

"Well, and indeed I do! So I will wish you

good morning. I am afraid we will not see much more of you?"

"It will not do to seem as if we cut each other," returned Mrs. Crichton. "We must exchange civilities, and I do hope you will let your daughter come and see even such a miserable sinner as I am."

"I'm sure Effie will be very pleased. Good day to you. Thanks, no; I will not want a cab; I'll walk awhile."

"Yon woman is too much for me, I'm thinking. I wish I hadn't meddled; but it was the right thing to do. Anyway, I have broken up their fanciful, foolish friendship. He'll come back to Jess Ogilvie, and if Effie goes on coughing I'll just take her and myself away over the sea."

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When the door closed on her assailant, Mrs. Crichton mechanically sat down to her tradesmen's books, but they had ceased to have any meaning for her. Presently, she put them neatly away, and tore up the slips of paper she had covered with figures. Then she threw herself into a large arm-chair and thought bitterly. Everything had come to an end! None but herself knew

how she had trembled and shrunk from the rebuke of Norman's mother, how desperate was the terror that forced her to mask it under a composure, which barely endured till the stern old woman had left her. How did she come to divine the close, strong tie which had sprung up between Norman and herself—how strong, how close, how tender, God only could judge. And now this must be torn away from her. She must nerve herself to resign all hope of his help, his companionship, while her fear and disgust towards her husband were increasing day by day. This must be done, however. She felt as if a radiant film had been removed from her eyes, and the dangers gathering round her stood out vividly against a lurid background of sin and shame.

But Norman! How could she persuade him to renounce her? How could she enforce the strong necessity of doing so, without betraying his mother?

From these painful reflections a sudden opening of the door, a rush of little feet, a chorus of childish voices, roused her. "Mummy dear, you are all by yourself—do come and have tea in the nursery. Do! do! do!"

"Yes, I will, my darlings. Mother has such a pain in her heart, you shall cure it for her."

"Oh, yes. Nurse shall put on a poultice, and I will make some toast. Come, Baby! Baby must be a good boy at tea, when mother is there."

Mrs. Crichton felt as if an angel hand had been outstretched to lift her from the slough of despond into which she had slipped.

When Mr. Crichton returned, about half-past seven, he went to his dressing-room, and then to the drawing-room. Not finding his wife there he rang impatiently.

"Does Mrs. Crichton know I have come in?" he asked the parlour-maid.

"I have only just heard you were," said his wife, following her closely.

"I am rather late, but I'll be ready directly. I don't want the dinner spoiled. Why, you are not dressed! What's the matter? Are there no clocks in the house?"

"Try to endure me in morning dress, George, for once," she said, smiling. "I went to have tea in the nursery and forgot the time playing with the little ones."

"That's just like you! as if you hadn't the whole

day to waste with them. You must needs put off your pranks till it is time to make yourself fit to sit down to table with your husband. It's not for want of clothes. God knows I pay enough for them."

"There is the bell. Let us go down," she returned, refusing to join battle.

Dinner was fortunately satisfactory, and produced a soothing effect, so Mrs. Crichton ventured to broach the subject of the theatre, and said it would be a great treat for the children.

"To-morrow night, eh," said Crichton, filling himself out a glass of very particular port. "Adair does throw his money away. I hope he will get a wife who knows the value of it, to take care of him. I think he will if he marries that Miss Ogilvie. Let me see, to-morrow will do very well. I have promised to dine with Crosbie, who is going to start business on his own account now that he has got a thumping legacy. He has a snug little place at Norwood, and will put me up for the night. So you can dine at any hour. I'll not reappear till dinner-time the day after to-morrow."

This was a joyful hearing for Mrs. Crichton, and in a few words more, all was arranged.

She sent a few lines to Adair, telling him she



was free to accept his invitation, adding that she would be engaged all day, but with the children would meet him at the theatre a little before the play began.

"I will speak to him the following morning," she thought. "I must enjoy this one evening! after—'The Deluge.'"

The evening was successful. The rapt delight of the children, their droll, wondering remarks—the kind friendliness of Effie, and the deep warm sympathy in every look and tone of Adair's eyes and voice, made Gwen painfully happy. She was very pale, yet bright and animated. At the end of the piece, Adair, who had been putting on Winnie's wraps with a care which amused his sister, suddenly caught Mrs. Crichton's eyes, and surprised an expression of mingled grief and despair in them that sent a thrill of fear, of painful anticipation, through him. He made no observation, however, till they reached Sutherland Gardens, where he was to leave Mrs. Crichton and her children, and then take Effie to her abode.

"May I come and see you to-morrow?" he said eagerly in a low voice as he shook hands.

"Yes! I want to see you. Is eleven too early?"

"No, of course not," a little surprised at this early appointment.

"At eleven, then," were her last words.

"I am sure we have had a charming evening, Norman," said his sister. "And how delighted the children were! They are sweet things. But I do not think Mrs. Crichton is well. Her colour changes so often, and she often looks woefully sad."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do; and somehow I fancy Mr. Crichton is not quite an angel. I've seen him look awfully black at her sometimes."

"You are a shrewd little woman, Effie, and you have a kind heart into the bargain," returned Norman. "But I daresay Crichton is not worse than his neighbours."

"Ah, well. Men do not really understand women."

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The morrow was dry and bright. Nurse was of opinion that a good run in Kensington Gardens would be the best thing for "those poor lambs, after being kept up half the night." And they had set off to play and roll their hoops about a quarter of an hour before Adair arrived.

Mrs. Crichton was not in the morning-room when he came in, and he looked round at the books, the photographs, the flowers, all so indicative of her individuality. He was standing before a large photograph of Crichton, which stood on the writing table, finding indications of every evil tendency in his good-looking face, when Gwendoline came in. She wore a morning gown of soft heliotrope stuff, edged with fine black lace, a delicate cravate of creamy Brussels lace knotted loosely round her throat.

"You are most punctual, Norman," and she gave him her hand for a moment, as she sat down in a long, low arm-chair.

"Small thanks to me for that. I have been awake half the night, and had to restrain myself from being at your door before ten this morning."

"It is terribly trying not to sleep. Are you not well?"

"Well enough ; but I have been haunted by a look I caught in your eyes last night. Something has gone wrong. What breakers are ahead, Gwendoline?"

"Yes, Norman, there are breakers ahead. I have set myself a dreadful task, and you must help me."

"That is all I ask to do. What has happened?"

"It is more difficult to speak—to explain—than even I expected. I must speak of things I would so much rather not mention, but I cannot avoid it. Do not look at me, dear Norman. You have been so true to me, you have relieved me from so much degradation, that I can now make a far better fight than I once dared to hope for." Adair leant forward, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. She hurried on. "I have been imprudent—you have been imprudent; and yesterday an outsider made a few remarks, that proved to me people had noticed the intimacy—that is, your sudden kind of adoption into our family has been noticed, unkindly noticed. Oh, Norman, I see as by some clear, cold, electric light that I must *not* indulge in the comfort of your friendship, that you must *not* sacrifice your future to me. We must be brave and break our bonds."

"Who has dared to meddle with what does not concern her, for it must be *her*? Ah!" a sudden pause. "Perhaps I can guess," he resumed, remembering some words which had fallen from Mary Hill. While *she* thought he meant his mother.

"How can people be so evil minded, so mischievous?"

"But, Norman, if one person imagines there is cause for blame, others may. The moment doubt is put into words the breath of scandal thickens, the tiny dropping stone inaugurates the circle, which widens and widens till all life is entangled in it. Then think! Oh, think, if suspicion once touched my husband, how merciless he would be. Norman, you saved me once, save me and yourself again. Leave us. Go—go away. Resolve to forget, to begin a new life, and your wounds, which I hope and believe are not deep, will close, and you will be whole of your disease. And for me, you know what consolations I have."

She pleaded long and earnestly, while he paced to and fro, arguing and begging as if for life.

"Norman!" she said at last, "I can urge no more, but if you care for me—if you would prove your affection, your loyalty to me, break off all intercourse with us—with me. I must fight my battle alone, no one can help me. Go then! I do not doubt that after a while you will forget. You will see some good sweet girl, whose presence, whose

companionship, will make your life a delightful Eden——”

“Yet,” interrupted Adair, “what harm can it do if I love you silently, and help you unobtrusively? This might be permitted. You must know I would ask nothing but to see you, Gwen, to see you sometimes.”

“And how long would it be, Norman, before *I* too, should hate the days when I did *not* see you! For *my* sake accept my counsel, and—and act upon it!”

Adair paused in his troubled walk. He grew white and kept silence for a moment, then he drew near and taking her hand, kissed it tenderly, reverentially.

“For your sake, then, I will obey you; for your sake I will leave you. Grant me two requests! First—after some months of absence let me come and see you, just to refresh my heart. Second—persuade your sister to correspond with me, she shall always have my address, and if you need me promise to send for me. Then I will implicitly obey you!”

To this she agreed, believing that absence would break the spell she had unconsciously thrown over him.

"Of course I cannot break away suddenly, but as soon as I find a valid excuse I will bid you farewell. Not for ever, Gwen, my beloved, my queen ! For once let me speak from my heart, and—and—if it does not make you unhappy—you will think of me sometimes ? " Again he caught her hand, kissing it repeatedly and fondly.

"Oh ! good-bye, Norman, dear, true friend ! God be with you !—God keep you." She drew her hand from him and swiftly left the room.

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## CHAPTER XIV

How the remainder of that miserable day passed Adair could never clearly remember. He went off to an hotel—not at the West End—and asking for a private room, some luncheon, pens, ink and paper, secured himself against interruption or intrusion. He wrote at intervals, and then tore up what he had written.

He thought and thought till he had worked himself clear of his unreasonable anger with Mrs. Crichton, for her positive determination to break off their intimacy. Then a passion of despairing tenderness rent his heart, at the memory of her admission that she feared her own weakness, which meant her growing affection for himself; *that* bound him to obey her wishes—what would he not renounce and endure to give her rest and peace? But what was he to do with a life so bleak so objectless, as his must be without her? What would hers be? How could she endure it, linked as she was to such a man as Crichton? With him, every day that passed would increase her heavy burden.



"When those children grow older, have wills of their own, and cease to be playthings, she must fight their battles as well as her own. My God ! why is that tyrant left to cumber the earth ? Were *he* out of the way life would be a paradise."

He paced to and fro, battling with himself till he came to see that for a right-minded woman there was no choice left between wrongdoing and renunciation. He would not be less brave than her ! It was the possibility of her returning his passionate love, which gave him strength to accept her decision. Not for a world's wealth would he add a hair's breadth to the gathering troubles which encircled her.

At least he was permitted to hold intercourse with her sister. This was something, and though at first he raged against Mary Hill, whom he suspected of having roused her sister's fears and self-distrust, he could not afford to quarrel with her. No, he must hang on to the rather cantankerous invalid, and—who could tell what the future held hidden behind its thick curtains ?

The dusk of a winter's day had fallen on streets and squares when he sallied forth at last, and, curiously enough, walking down Holborn,

he suddenly found himself face to face with Crichton.

"Hallo!" cried that gentleman. "What are you doing so far east?"

"Oh! I was strolling towards Lincoln's Inn, but I am afraid I shall not find my lawyer."

"So much the better; you ought to steer clear of those sharks."

"No doubt; but they are sometimes indispensable. I have made an offer for a place just over the border, and I want to know if it is accepted."

"Land, eh! That's not a good investment, it's going down in value—and will go down."

"Suppose you come and dine with me, and give me your views?" cried Adair, a sudden delightful thought crossing him. "I shall save her from three or four hours of the brute's presence. You know," he continued aloud, "I am no man of business. Let us go to Verey's—a brisk walk will do you good after a busy day."

"Thanks. I shall be delighted—but let's look for a telegraph office—I must wire off to my wife."

"What an attentive spouse," said Adair, laughing.

"You see if the cook knows at once, she needn't

go on with dinner, and can save the food from being spoiled!" At this, Adair continued to laugh so heartily, that Crichton began to think himself a wit. He declared afterwards that he never knew what a thorough man of the world Adair was till that evening, that he seemed sharp and shrewd and equal to *do* any lawyer in England. To say nothing of the queer amusing stories. It was altogether an amusing evening, though Adair was rather too generous with his champagne!

Meantime, Mrs. Adair fretted and fumed at her son's absence. He had not appeared till the fourth evening after the birthday dinner. His mother was alone when he came in, and taking a cup of tea, with a buttered scone for her dinner.

"Lord's sake, my laddie—what's gone wrong with you?" was her exclamation when he came into the room. "You look like the ghost of yourself."

"All fancy, mother!"—kissing her. "I am quite right. I've had a bad headache; I want more fresh air and exercise. And how have you been?"

"No great things," she returned, watching him anxiously, to see if he had any idea she had

been meddling in his relations with Mrs. Crichton. "Where have you been all these days, Norman?"

"Nowhere; everywhere! Who can account for himself in London?"

"I don't quite like to hear you say that. Have you seen Jess Ogilvie since their party?"

"No."

"Nor Mr. and Mrs. Crichton?"

"Yes."

"And how is Mrs. Crichton? She was tired like, after the party."

"Have you seen her since?" he asked, quickly.

"Eh; it was after the dinner she told me she was weary."

"Are you not all right, mother?"

"I'm right enough, physically, but not in my mind. I went into Effie's room yesterday afternoon, and I found her crying and blowing her nose over a sheet of foreign note paper, and I feared ever since she might be writing to that fiddler man. Now, I'm not that sure of Susan, our maid; she is a prudent, wiselike woman, but too fond of the siller—she'd post a letter to the de'il for half a crown."

"It's a curious dispensation that men and women always fall in love with the wrong people."

"I would not use that term, Norman. It's not a dispensation, but just the unruliness of our own sinful hearts."

"Well, it's an infernal nuisance," ejaculated her son.

Mrs. Adair looked startled. "Eh, my dear lad, yon is not a right word! But I'm thinking that we have had enough of London. I think we'll try Cannes for a couple of months. Effie's cough is very trying, and after Christmas is worse in England than before."

"But you may stumble on the objectionable fiddler at Cannes?"

"Well; I heard he had gone to Rome; I wish you would come with us, my dearie."

"I don't mind if I do," said Adair. "But tomorrow I'm going to look at this old place in Galloway, and may be there, and in Edinburgh, for a week or so. I am getting rather sick of London."

"Indeed; and so am I."

"If you will wait for me, I'll see you safe to Cannes and then ramble about a little. I don't know North Italy."

"I should be very pleased. Maybe the general and Jess might be tempted to join us."

"Why? You are not going into partnership with them, for good and all?"

"No, no; not if you don't like—but I thought it would make things more cheerful for you, dear."

"It would bore me to death!" Here Effie's entrance stopped their conversation.

The following day Adair went North, and nothing was heard of him for ten days. When he returned, Mrs. Adair and her daughter had already started for Paris. They paid a farewell visit to Mrs. Crichton, who received them with great composure and civility. "I'm sure I'm sorry we did not see more of you, Mrs. Crichton," said Mrs. Adair, "but time runs away so fast in London! We all seem scattering; Miss Ogilvie was very sorry she was out, when you were so good as to call. She and her father have gone down to Torquay."

"Indeed! I hope the milder climate will quite set you up, Miss Adair," added Mrs. Crichton kindly.

"Thank you! I wonder, Mrs. Crichton, if I might write to you, and if you would answer me?" suggested Effie, tentatively.

"Of course I should, and be very pleased to do so."

"Hoot, Effie! Mrs. Crichton has other fish to fry."

"I shall expect to hear from you, Miss Adair," were Mrs. Crichton's last words.

"Eh, Effie, but that woman is looking awful bad. There's a broken-heartedness in her een I never saw in them before. Eh! but life is a great mystery. I'm not sorry to leave this big bad town."

"Well, mother, we are just going to another."

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The two months which followed were probably the dreariest intervals of time that Mrs. Crichton or Adair had ever spent. For the latter, all zest seemed gone from life. For her, life at each step grew harder, and the courage to face and surmount difficulties grew less, as her physical strength diminished.

Adair wandered to and fro, aimlessly—always keeping up a close correspondence with Mary Hill.

He found some relief to the gloom of his thoughts, in the company of a young clergyman, whom he met in Florence, and whom he intro.

duced to his mother and sister. Occupied as he was with his own sorrow, he began to suspect before long that this pleasant cultivated cleric might probably replace the "long-haired fiddler man," to whom his mother objected so strongly.

While he meditated on this glimpse of blue sky, he received a letter from his solicitor, requesting his presence in London to complete the formalities attending the purchase of an estate.

It was with a thrill of joy he hastened to comply with the demand. He had been resolute in resisting the constant pining of his heart, to be in the same town, within a few streets of the woman who had grown so dear to him. Now, his return to London was a matter of necessity. Even so, he would be cautious. His first visit should be to the objectionable husband. If he asked him, Adair, to dinner, he must accept. It would not do to make any change in the old familiarity. Then, then he would see her, hear her voice, touch her hand.

After visiting his lawyer, and making an appointment for the next day, Adair called at Crichton's office, but did not find him. He, therefore, left his card, and proceeded to execute some commissions for his mother.



After a restless night, disturbed by the sense of being "so near and yet so far," from her he loved best, Adair found among his other letters the following—

"DEAR ADAIR,—

"Very sorry to miss you to-day. Try to look in to-morrow, about three. I am not quite satisfied about the Sea-side Villa Company. I should like your ideas on one or two points.

"Yours truly,

"G. CRICHTON."

It was dated from his office. With a vague hope that this interview would lead to renewing the links which he feared had been broken, he started for the City at once. "He will be sure to ask me to dinner," he pondered, as he drove along, "and I'll go. I shall soon see how the land lies."

Occupied with his own thoughts, he did not heed the crowded streets through which he drove, and it seemed only a few minutes after he got into the hansom before it stopped. The driver lifted the trap, and said :

"Can't get no further, sir ; there's been a haccident, and the street is blocked."

‘All right ; I’ll walk,” returned Adair, who paid the man and jumped out.

There was a confusion of men and horses in the street, in the midst of which the helmets of several policemen could be descried, and Adair was naturally attracted.

“What has happened ?” he asked a respectable-looking man who had also paused to look on.

“Bad accident, sir. Gentleman was crossing, and a mail-cart came by full tilt ; the shaft caught his shoulder and hurled him under that big waggon. The wheel has gone right over his middle. Stay, here they come.” And the crowd parted to permit the passage of a stretcher, carried by two policemen, on which lay a covered burden.

“Where are they taking the poor fellow ?” asked Adair.

“To the station, close by. The doctor isn’t sure whether there’s life in him or not,” returned a man who had been in the middle of the crowd. “You see the streets are slippery, especially on the slope here” (it was in Cannon Street), “and the carter couldn’t pull up.”

Urged by a vague curiosity, Adair followed, managing to get near the stretcher, round which

the crowd pressed so closely that the cloth which concealed the injured man was disarranged and the face displayed—only for a moment, but that moment sufficed to strike Adair motionless, silent, powerless, as he recognised Crichton.

The crowd moved on, jostling and nearly overturning the stunned, stupefied individual whose idle curiosity was now so strangely satisfied. For a minute or two he could not think—he could hardly see ; but he rallied quickly, and bent his steps to the station, where he sent in his card to the inspector with a pencilled line to say that he could identify the sufferer.

After what seemed a long time to Adair, during which the doctor ascertained that life was extinct, he was admitted, and informed the authorities that he was well acquainted with the deceased, the contents of whose pocket-book corroborated his statements. He therefore undertook the painful task of breaking the death-tidings to the family.

Within an hour from the time he set out for the City he was speeding westward with his momentous intelligence. He felt still dazed, but his ideas were growing clearer. What an extraordinary change had a few minutes wrought in the present

and future of the woman who was so dear to him ! She was free. Never again would she tremble before the despot who was her inferior. Had he executed his new will ? No matter. He (Adair) had, thank Heaven, enough and to spare—enough to make her a happy tranquil home which should atone for and obliterate the past, if (what a tremendous if !) she could be won to think of him as a partner for life. Certainly, so far, but for one admission, he could not flatter himself that she regarded him as anything more than a kind and useful friend. Still, he could not help hoping. Was it not selfish and heartless to think in this strain, when he had scarcely escaped from the presence of death ? He did not know ; he did not care. How slowly the man drove ! how blocked the streets were with traffic ! At last, at last, he reached the well-known door.

“Is Mrs. Crichton at home ?”

“No, sir,” returned the servant, startled out of her well-bred impassibility by his disturbed looks. “She has been out some time. Won’t you walk in and sit down ?”

“Thank you. Perhaps Mrs. Crichton is at her

sister's; pray send round there and say I am anxious to see her."

"Very well, sir."

It seemed to Adair that he paced the dining-room for ages before the maid returned to say that her mistress was not with Miss Hill. How much longer should he have to wait? Even while he thought this, the door-bell sounded, and Mrs. Crichton entered, a slightly startled look in her eyes. On meeting him she stopped short.

"Norman!" she exclaimed. "What is it?"

"I am sorry to tell you," he began, hurriedly, "that Mr. Crichton has met with a—a—serious accident."

"How? Where?" she exclaimed. "Is he very badly hurt? Does he suffer much? I must go to him at once."

"He does not suffer at all," said Adair, in a low tone.

"Ah!" she cried, catching his arm and looking in his face, "he is dead!"

"He is dead," echoed Adair.

"Dead!" she repeated, with a little cry—"before he knew one gleam of true pure pleasure, one touch of real love! What a lost life! Oh, I might have

done more for him had I been braver and stronger." She grew so white that Adair thought she was going to faint, and hastily drew forward a chair, into which she sank. "Tell me all. My brain seems dulled and still," she said.

Adair's story was brief, but she did not seem to take it in. The shock was too great. She stretched out her hands with something of the pathetic helplessness of the blind, as she rose and moved towards the door, as if not quite conscious.

Adair was alarmed, and rang for the servants, to whom he hastily told the tidings of their master's death. Then Nurse took charge of her mistress. "She is fairly overdone, even without this shock," she said. "If you'll tell cook, who is a steady, sensible woman, she'll have things ready and send for the doctor ; he lives close by. I will not leave my mistress."

Adair looked wistfully after Mrs. Crichton, but she did not seem to see him, and soon he found ample employment, as everyone applied to him for directions and suggestions, until the doctor, who was also a personal friend of Mrs. Crichton's, came to share his responsibilities, and he escaped to tell the particulars of the fatal accident to Miss Hill.

The days which immediately ensued were fully occupied with the preparations for the ceremonies and business which death necessitates.

Adair had not seen Mrs. Crichton since the day on which he had brought her the tidings of her widowhood. She had sent the little ones away with their nurse out of the house of mourning, and had for a companion and guest a lady who was a distant cousin of Mr. Crichton's, the only member of his family he had ever acknowledged.

The widow was a striking and stately figure in her trailing garments of deepest black, as she received the funeral guests with a composed and reverent air, but Adair had few opportunities of speaking to her. He felt how her hand trembled as he held it, and whispered a petition to be allowed to call upon her soon.

"I will write to you, my dear good friend," she replied. "At present I have scarcely an hour I can call my own."

Already he noticed that the guarded inscrutable look had gone from her eyes—they were franker, softer; and he thanked God that the shadow had been lifted from her life.

After the funeral Mrs. Crichton went to her

room. Most of the guests dispersed at the cemetery, but Adair and the lawyer returned to the house, where the latter spoke for a few minutes to the widow, then he and Adair walked away together.

"After all," said the lawyer, "that accident was, on the whole, a stroke of luck for Mrs. Crichton. Her husband had made a very unjust will. He had appointed a man she objected to, and another, a stranger to her and a busy M.P., executors to his will and guardians to his children, and bequeathed her a pittance of only two hundred and fifty a year. In both wills his wife forfeits everything if she marries again. He was a very wrong-headed man, very—especially of late. I suspect his wife had a deuced hard time of it. Crichton was on his way to my office to execute this last will and testament (which I assure you I fought against as long as I could) when he met with his death."

"I trust Mrs. Crichton will have peace for the rest of her life," returned Adair.

"Well, yes, I hope so. But it is more than I expect. She is an uncommon handsome, charming woman, and before a couple of years are over some smart fellow will snap her up. No amount of



matrimonial misery warns a widow off the line. Well, I must say good day ; this is my 'bus."

It was more than a week before Mrs. Crichton wrote to Adair ; then she appointed the next day but one for his visit, and concluded, "I still feel strange and bewildered, but the children are with me again, and I am a little more like myself."

Adair could not settle to any occupation, so eager and feverish were his anticipations of the approaching interview. Nevertheless, he schooled himself rigidly to maintain the kindly calmness of an old friend in voice and manner when he again looked into the eyes he loved so well, and heard the voice which gave a charm to everything it uttered.

The morning of the day appointed by Mrs. Crichton, just as Adair was starting for Sutherland Gardens, a telegram was put into his hand. It was from his sister, announcing the sudden seizure by paralysis of his mother, and begging him to come to them at once. There were many matters to arrange in the next few hours, but first he would see Gwendoline and show her the telegram.

Mrs. Crichton received him with grave, gentle composure, and sympathized warmly in his distress

respecting his mother. "You must not waste time here, Norman, when you have so much to do. As to myself, I have nothing decided to tell you. I can make no plans until I know exactly how I stand ; and I believe our affairs are rather complicated in consequence of Mr. Crichton's connection with various companies. But you will write to me about your mother ?—and I will keep you informed of my movements."

"Yes, I must not stay. Thank heaven, I do not fear to leave you now !" exclaimed Adair. "Even if I am obliged to stay with my mother, *you* are safe and free ; no harm can come to you."

"Let us forget the past, Norman," she returned, with a slight increase of colour ; "I wish to bury it in my unfortunate husband's grave ; for he *was* unfortunate, to be colour-blind to the true aspects of life."

"You promise to write to me, then ?" urged Adair, taking her hand, and looking long and wistfully into her eyes.

"I shall be glad to write to and hear from you ; let me know directly how you find your mother. Good-bye, dear Norman, good-bye, and God bless you !"

He kissed her hand and was gone.

Mrs. Adair's illness proved to be long and critical, and her recovery exceedingly slow. When able to be moved, she was advised to try the south of Italy during the remainder of the winter and early spring. Norman could not leave to his sister the task of conveying the fragile invalid such a distance unaided, and therefore took charge of the party, much to the delight of mother and daughter. In truth, he was not anxious to return to England immediately. He knew that Mrs. Crichton was safe and well; she wrote regularly, if not frequently, sometimes to him, sometimes to his sister, with whom she had renewed her intercourse, and he felt that if he were often with her, drinking in the delight of her presence, he could hardly hold back the avowal of his profound love for her, hardly resist the passionate pleading for a promise of future union; and this would, he knew, offend her. And thus the months rolled past hopefully, tolerably, and early summer had come round again when Adair permitted himself to return to London.

How delightfully familiar it seemed to him as he issued from his hotel the morning after his arrival! The interval since he left had been a period of stagnation, an emotional blank, and it

slipped from his memory like water over a smooth decline. Was it yesterday or a year ago or ten since he hailed the Kilburn omnibus and on that most prosaic conveyance drove away to meet his fate? A whole year ago—the most inactive year of his life—the one, the only one, which could never be forgotten. Even though he ventured to hope for a happy future, still, happiness does not write its mark upon the soul like the fever and pain and unrest of a mental struggle. He hoped, chiefly because he dared not despair. After all, why should Gwendoline refuse him? Of course she was too good, too fine a creature for him; but she knew him well, and trusted him—ay, and liked him! So, even without loving him as he loved her, she might be disposed to let him share her life as a tender, sympathetic friend, who would care for her children as if they were his own, and be a real helpmeet. “Of course I shall feel my way and be very prudent,” thought Adair, as he rang the door-bell, and tried to keep himself cool and composed, though his heart was beating hard and his pulses were throbbing.

A strange servant opened the door—a trifle which struck Adair as an evil omen.

"Mrs. Crichton was at home : would he walk in ?"

He did, and was ushered up to the dreary drawing-room, dreary now no longer. A bright fire burned in the grate, books and work lay around ; but in the back room was a large packing-case, and a variety of ornamental articles lay about it. Evidently some change was in progress. But he had no time to conjecture further, for Mrs. Crichton came in quickly, with both hands outstretched.

"My dear Norman ! I had no idea you would be here so soon."

"Soon ! It seems to me infinite ages since I saw you."

He stood holding her hands and gazing in delight at the radiant health, the serene content, that beamed in her fair face. She had evidently flushed with pleasure at seeing him, for the brilliant colour faded somewhat as they exchanged inquiries and then sat down for a long talk.

"And your mother will return in June ? How pleased I shall be to see her ! You know, Norman, I used to be a little afraid of her : she was very stately."

"She is very fragile now. I fear I must give up the project of settling her in Scotland, though she would like it : she could not stand the climate."

Here a pause occurred. Adair found it harder and harder to preserve the calm, friendly tone he had prescribed for himself. Loving, passionate words sprang to his lips ; and then he knew he could not keep his eyes silent while he tried to regain self-control.

Mrs. Crichton rose, and, crossing the room to a writing-table on which lay letters and papers, unlocked a drawer and took out a thick envelope. "There, Norman," she said, placing in his hand, "at last I am able to pay the kindest creditor any one ever had—at least all that can be paid, which is but little. From the full obligation I never wish to be relieved."

"But, Mrs. Crichton—Gwendoline, I do not want this."

"No, perhaps ; but you will find some other poor wretch to help. There, put it away ; and none can ever know how you helped me in my sorest need."

Adair had too much delicacy to refuse, but the little incident seemed for a moment to raise up a

barrier between them ; his impulse to avow his feelings for her was checked, and while he hesitated she went on to speak of the children.

“ You know,” added Mrs. Crichton, “ that I have my poor Mary with me. We shall never part again. She is a new creature, as you will see ; though she suffers at times. I have also told you that we shall not be so well off as I at first expected ; but I have quite enough, and we have just succeeded in getting rid of the lease of this house · you see I am beginning to pack up.”

“ And where are you going ? ”

“ I am in treaty for a sweet old house with a big lawn and garden near W——, on the Epsom and Leatherhead line. I do hope I shall get it : my darlings will blossom like roses in the delightful air ; and it is scarcely half an hour from town, so you can run down and see us, Norman, when you are ashore ; for I suppose you *will* go to sea ? ”

A thrill of cold despair shivered through him. What did all these plans mean, in which he could take no part ? Prudence, caution, all went by the board : he must grasp this lovely, lovable woman for whom his heart ached.

“ But is it—is it wise to bury yourself alive in a

suburban country place—the most lonely of all places ?” he exclaimed, in imploring tones. “You, at your age ! You, so suited to enjoy and charm ! I don’t like to hear of it. I——For God’s sake don’t plan out your life without leaving room in it for me ! You know that I am devoted to you heart and soul. Let me give my existence to you and your sweet children : I love them for your sake and their own. You could trust your happiness to me, and you can take your own time. I would not ask you to do what is unbecoming. You don’t know how utterly you have taken possession of me ; but you do know I love you—have loved you almost from the first.”

“Yes, Norman,” she said, softly, while she grew paler, “I did fear it, even when I felt most grateful to you. You have been so true, so considerate, to respect me as you have done in spite of my cowardly want of respect for myself ! And you, Norman, knowing that I am safe and well, you will throw off this—this imprudent love for me.”

“You do not know what you are saying,” he broke in passionately. “My life will be wrecked. I have existed for the last months on the hope of



winning you. Don't throw me aside! You are too young to have done with Love! These painful memories will fade, and Life will put on its spring attire. Do not reject me!"

"It would not be kind or just, Norman, either to hesitate or to accept you. Throw yourself into your profession, and the forgetfulness you prophesy for me will come to you. Then you will meet some fair young girl whose fresh heart will be all yours—for you are a man any woman might love—some creature who has never been bruised, and wounded, or dragged through the mire as I have been."

"You exaggerate!" cried Adair, passionately. "Even if it were true—bruised, wounded, mire-stained—you would still be my queen," and he stretched out his arms to her—noticing that she grew very white, and the hand which held the photograph of the house she had taken up to show him trembled. She let it drop, and big tears gathered in her eyes slowly, welled over and rolled down her cheek.

"You do not know, perhaps, that in his will Mr. Crichton directs that, if I marry again, I forfeit the provision he made?"

"Great Heavens! Is that worth mentioning?" interrupted Adair.

"It is, Norman! It will convey the idea that he had some reason to believe I had a thought—an inclination for some one while he, my husband, was in life! And if—I—married you it would give colour to such a suspicion."

"I should have thought you had too much sense, Gwen, to give a moment's consideration to such a contemptible idea."

"Ah, Norman!" pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, "conscience makes cowards of us all."

"What!" cried Adair, pausing in his troubled walk to and fro. "Can it be that my love—my devotion has touched your heart? Why do you punish yourself then—*and* me?"

"I should bring you such burdens, Norman! The children—my poor sister——"

"I have a house with room in it for all who are dear to you. You know that you would trust your children to me——"

"And how vexed your mother——"

"You are not marrying *her*! And, poor soul, her likings and dislikings are few and faint now. Gwendoline—my life, my soul—you are young

and sweet, and infinitely charming. Let us love and enjoy together—few have been given such a chance as we have—for you love me, my heart, you love me.”

He caught her hands and drew them round his neck, and at last learnt, from the warmth and tenderness of her answering kisses—how dear, how beloved he was.

THE END.

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